INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT

FOURTH EDITION

John Drane

INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT

FOURTH EDITION

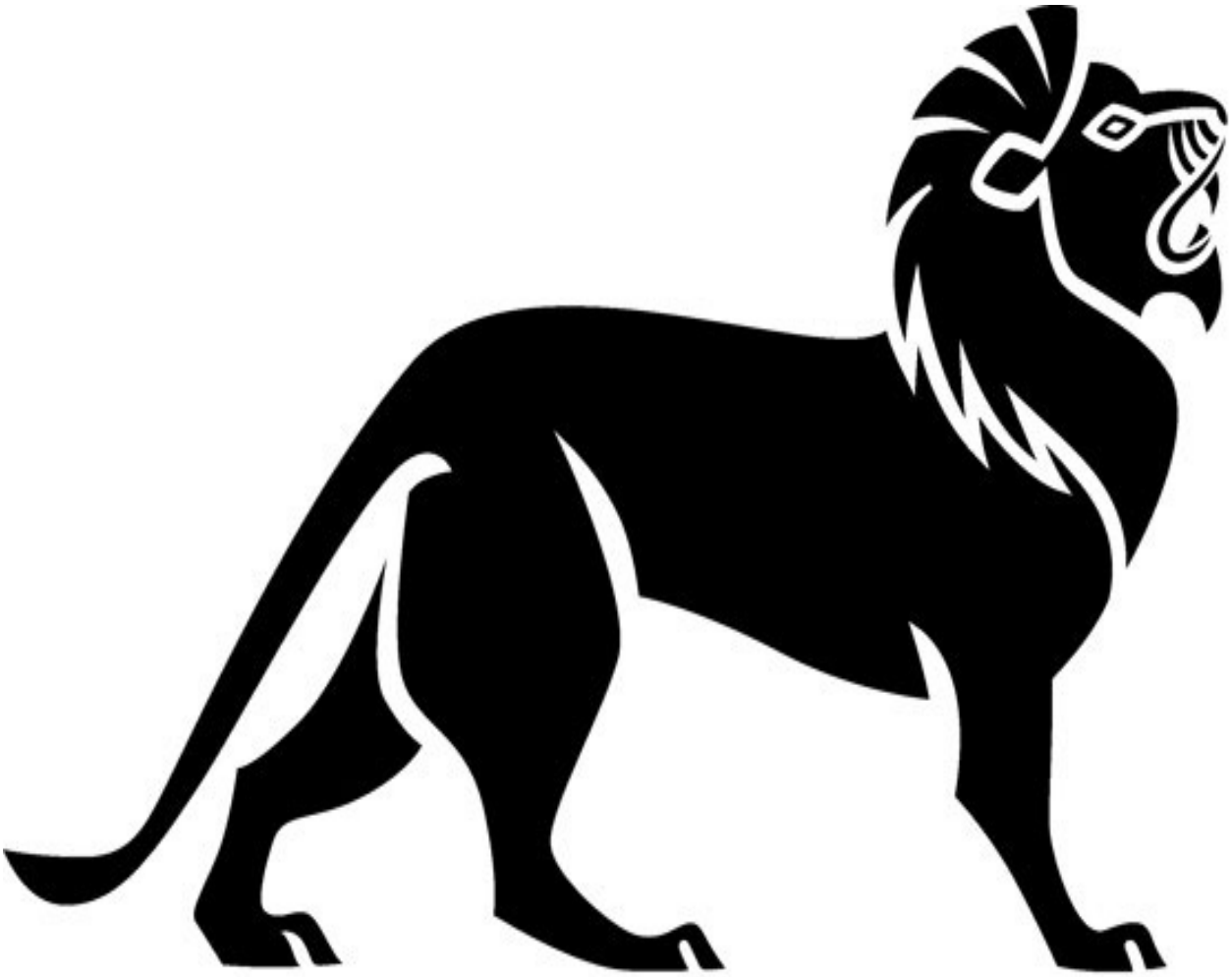
John Drane

INTRODUCING THE

NEW TESTAMENT

FOURTH EDITION

John Drane



LION

SCHOLAR

Text copyright © 2019 John Drane

This edition copyright © 2019 Lion Hudson IP Limited

The right of John Drane to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by

Lion Hudson Limited

Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Business Park

Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 8DR, England

www.lionhudson.com

ISBN 978 1 9125 5211 5

e-ISBN 978 1 9125 5212 2

First hardback edition 1986

First paperback edition 1986

Acknowledgments

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the Good News Bible © 1994 published by the Bible Societies/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd UK, Good News Bible © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used with permission.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible copyright © 1346, 1952 and 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Extracts from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotation marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton, a member of the Hodder Headline

Group. All rights reserved. ‘NIV’ is a trademark of International Bible Society. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotation marked NCV is taken from the New Century Version. Copyright © by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotation marked NLT is taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Extracts marked ‘author’s translation’ are taken from the author’s own translations.

All maps by Richard Watts, Total Media Services.

Cover image © hadynyah / istockphoto.com

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

CONTENTS

Introduction

The beginning of the story

Jesus

Early Christianity

Radical lifestyle

New faith

Opposition

Changing the world

Part 1

Context and Culture

1. Greeks and Romans

Hellenism

Civic society

Decision-makers and bureaucrats

Slavery

Adoption

Citizenship

Religion

The gods

Civic religion

Domestic religion

Religion and the emperor

Philosophy

The Stoics

The Epicureans

Alternative spiritualities

Questioning the mainstream

Mystery religions

Gnosticism

Judaism

Christianity

2. Palestine and its People

Hellenism and Judaism

Jews and Romans

Herod the Great

Three Herods

Two more Herods

Religious loyalties

Traditionalists: the Sadducees

Progressives: the Pharisees

Monastics: the Essenes

Militants: the Zealots

Dreamers: the Apocalyptists

Rejects: the Samaritans

Keeping the faith

The synagogue

The festivals

Home and family life

Men and women

Children and schooling

Work and home

Rites of passage

Part 2

Jesus

3. Birth and Early Years

The birth of Jesus

The date

The stories

Jesus grows up

Nazareth

Jesus and his family

John the Baptist

Jesus is baptized

John and Qumrân

Temptations and priorities

Money

Fame

Power

4. The Message

The kingdom of God

A new way of being

An eschatological kingdom

‘Kingdom of God’ or ‘Kingdom of heaven’?

Who did Jesus think he was?

The Son of Man

The Messiah

The Son of God

The Servant

Jesus beyond the Gospels

5. Stories and Signs

Jesus the teacher

Parables and their meaning

Parable or allegory?

The point of the parables

Parables and their hearers

The message

Kingdom and church

Why parables?

Signs of the kingdom

Miracles and their message

Miracle stories in context

Hellenistic miracle stories

6. How to Live Like Jesus

Questioning the tradition

Status and money

People and priorities

Abolition or fulfilment?

Creative engagement

Jesus as a teacher of wisdom

God at the centre

Human goodness and divine generosity

Goodness and community

Believing and behaving

Creative transformation

7. Crucifixion

Opposition and conflict

The Last Supper

Passover or informal meal?

A new covenant

Jesus on trial

Jews and Romans

Accusations and process

Crucifixion

Reflecting on the death of Jesus

Battle

Example

Sacrifice

Ransom

For others

Grace and forgiveness

8. Resurrection

Evidence from the New Testament

The early church

Paul

The Gospels

The disciples

Facts and faith

A subjective experience?

A theological construct?

A later belief?

The meaning of it all

Identifying Jesus

New life

Future hope

The ascension

Part 3

The Gospels

9. Understanding the Gospels

What is a gospel?

Biography?

Good news?

Gathering materials

The Hebrew scriptures

Words of Jesus

Constructing the narratives

Wording

Order

Contents

Style

Theology

How many sources?

New approaches to old problems

Did Q really exist?

Looking behind the text

Challenging the consensus

Insights from the past

Who were the gospels for?

10. Four Portraits of Jesus

Mark

The Peter connection

Author

Readers

Date

Purpose

Style

Ending

Luke

Date

Purpose

Matthew

Structure

Purpose

Author

Date

John

Structure

Character

Origins

Purpose

Author and date

Redaction criticism and gospel origins

11. Can We Trust the Gospels?

Orality and literacy

Presuppositions

Intellectual imperialism

History and culture

Inscriptions and artefacts

Language

Distinctiveness

Searching for the real Jesus

The Quest begins

The Quest is suspended

The Quest resumes

The Third Quest

Identifying the words of Jesus

Dissimilarity (distinctiveness)

Multiple attestation

A basic flaw?

Prophets in the early church

Part 4

Good News Goes Global

12. The Acts of the Apostles

Back to Jesus

Law and gospel

Religion and race

The church is born

A promise fulfilled

Pentecost

The church grows

Tensions and conflicts

Leaving Jerusalem

Judea and Samaria

Widening horizons

Galilee

Other apostles and their travels

Telling the stories: Luke’s second volume

Author

Date

Character

Purpose

13. Paul: From Persecutor to Apostle

Early life

Tarsus

Jerusalem

Influences

Judaism

Philosophy

Mystery religions

Theatre

Emperor

Blasphemy and persecution

The Damascus road

What Paul did next

Dealing with Jerusalem

Dates and places

Paul and the earliest church

The Hebrew scriptures

Jews and Gentiles

Authority

Jesus

14. Paul: Travels and Letters

From one Antioch to another

Gentile churches

Judaizers

Paul the letter-writer

The Galatian churches

The letter to the Galatians

The Apostolic Council

Back to Galatia

Philippi

Converts

Imprisonment

Athens

Corinth

A letter to the church in Thessalonica

Paul and his strategy

How should Christians behave?

What about the future?

Living the Christian life

Another letter

The author

The Message

15. Paul and the Churches

Ephesus

The impact of the gospel

Prison again?

Advising the churches

Paul and the church at Corinth

Disappointing news from Corinth

Paul sends Corinthians

Paul visits Corinth

Another letter

Good news from Corinth

Paul sends Corinthians

1 Corinthians

Life in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21)

Confusion at Corinth

The answer in Christ

Life in the world (1 Corinthians 5:1–11:1)

Life in the church (1 Corinthians 11:2–15:58)

More arguments and letters

2 Corinthians

Facing up to problems (2 Corinthians 1:3–2:13)

What is an apostle? (2 Corinthians 2:14–7:4)

Looking to the future (2 Corinthians 7:5–9:15)

Authority and charisma (2 Corinthians 10:1–13:10)

Romans

Purpose

Contents

Paul and his Jewish roots

16. Paul: The End of the Journey

Generosity and its unexpected consequences

A collection for Jerusalem

Arrest and trials

Destination Rome

When did Paul die?

Letters from prison

The church at Colossae

City life in the Roman empire

Colossians

Philemon

The church at Ephesus

Ephesians

The church at Philippi

Philippians

Timothy and Titus

The Pastorals

17. Paul and His Message

From letters to theology

Back to the Damascus road

Who is Jesus?

What is the gospel?

A social gospel

What about the Law?

Living the Christian life

Explaining the faith

The Hebrew scriptures

The world of experience

Paul on death

What is the church?

The body of Christ

Life in the body

Leadership in the body

Paul and inclusivity

Racism

Women and men

Slavery

Women's lives in the Roman empire

Part 5

Refining the Faith

18. Ethics and Ritual: James and Hebrews

James on Christian morality

A Christian book?

James and Jesus

The Letter of James

Author

Date

Origin

‘Faith’ and ‘works’ in Paul and James

Hebrews and Jewish ritual

The centrality of the temple

The message of the book

Reimagining the Old Testament

Hebrews in context

Author

Readers

Date

19. Covenant and Confidence: 1 Peter and Revelation

Christians and the covenant

Themes in 1 Peter

The believer’s status (1:1–12)

Christian maturity (1:13–2:10)

Christian behaviour (2:11–4:19)

Serving Christ (5:1–14)

A hidden liturgy?

1 Peter in context

Author

Date and origin

Peter and the church in Rome

Revelation: confidence in the face of adversity

The book and its message

Making sense of the message

Author and date

20. Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Organization

Letters to seven churches

1 John

‘False prophets’

Docetism

The letter

John and his epistles

Jude and 2 Peter

Context

Authors and dates

The Spirit and the letter

From spontaneity to authority

Institutional influences

Church growth

Heresy and Orthodoxy

Frustrated hope

Putting the New Testament together

21. Reading and Understanding the New Testament

Beginning where we are

Starting points

Influences

The text’s own context

The sociological context

Worldview

Personal perceptions

Discovering the message

The historical-critical method

Versions and translations

Ancient documents

New Testament texts

Scribes and copyists

Classifying texts

Glossary

Other resources on the New Testament

Index

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the story

The New Testament documents the rise of one of the most remarkable religious and social movements the world has ever seen. In their own day the first Christians were accused of turning the world upside down with their message (Acts 17:6), and they have influenced every subsequent generation in history. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament contain accounts of their activities, together with letters and other occasional writings that not only document the early years of the Christian church but also provide readers with a unique archive of social history encompassing the diverse cultures that existed alongside one another in the Roman empire some 2,000 years ago. Moreover, this is no domesticated, disinfected collection of writings. On the contrary, it bears testimony to many debates and disputes about the significance of Jesus of Nazareth as those who were captivated by his teachings worked out how to apply them to the realities of daily life. Even the stories of his life appear not in one agreed version, but through the perspectives of four different writers, each offering their own distinctive insights into the meaning of the events they describe.

In the centuries since then, these writings have carved out a unique place for themselves in world literature, and passages like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) or Paul's poem in praise of love (1 Corinthians 13) are recognized as outstanding compositions, even by those who have little time for their underlying message. This is especially surprising in light of the relative unsophistication of the New Testament writers. Few of them had any formal education, and some of their books could hardly be described as literary masterpieces. Yet that has not prevented millions of people all over the world from reading the New Testament and finding in its pages personal inspiration for their daily living. Though written in a cultural context far different from the digital world of today, and by individuals who were an oppressed and persecuted minority, it has had the capacity to speak to people of different cultures, and at all periods of history.

Its contents can seem disparate and unconnected: it is not one single book but a small library, containing diverse types of literature compiled by many different authors at different points during the first century AD. But for all its diversity, the New Testament has one central focus. These books not only reflect the fervour and devotion of the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth, but they also insist that the story of Jesus is the grand metanarrative of all history – the one big story that gives meaning and significance to all the small stories of everyday human experience. The consistent testimony of these writers is that as a consequence of their encounter with Jesus, the fragments of their own existence had been transformed into something more glorious than they could possibly have imagined – and that this transformation was available to any who would join them on their spiritual journey. For this reason, and regardless of the cost (which often included suffering and death), they were determined to share their story with others, and the conviction that this was the way to find true fulfilment and meaning is at the heart of all their writings.

Jesus

It has occasionally been claimed that Jesus himself never actually existed, but this is an eccentric opinion with no evidential foundation. There is plenty of room for debate around his ultimate significance, but there is no doubt that he was born into an ordinary Jewish family, almost certainly in 4 BC – and therefore before the start of the Christian era, which is conventionally regarded as having commenced with the birth of Jesus! The explanation for this apparent discrepancy is to be found in the fact that in the early centuries of what we now think of as the Christian era, several different ways of calculating dates were in use. The first person to date events by reference to the birth of Jesus was Victor, bishop of Tunnuna in North Africa, who died around AD 570, but it was the eighth-century English writer, the Venerable Bede, who introduced the concept of 'before Christ' (BC) and 'in the year of the Lord' (AD, in Latin anno Domini), and in due course this system of dating was adopted throughout Europe. Bede was also responsible for the convention that there would be no such thing as a year 0 in the Christian calendar, but it would move straight from 1 BC to AD 1. Several dating methods were in use for a considerable time before historians established a common system, and on that agreed understanding the date of Jesus' birth was probably in either 5 or 4 BC. Little is known of Jesus' early childhood, though as a young adult he made a name for himself as a religious teacher (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:41–52; 4:16–30). He was in the public gaze for little more than three years before his life was cut short by his execution at the hands of the Romans (Luke 23:33), yet in that short time he delivered a message that was to exert a crucial influence not only on his own people, but also on the subsequent course of world history.

Jesus' lifestyle was not especially unusual in the context of the Palestinian countryside where he lived and worked, and there were many itinerant teachers at this time who not only shared their insights into life and its meaning but also gathered groups of followers who then went on to disseminate their teachings more widely. Jesus appears to have adopted a similar strategy and though his following could be many thousands strong (Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–9) he preferred to work with a smaller inner core of twelve close disciples (Matthew 10:1–4).

Subsequent generations have often imagined Jesus and his disciples as relatively poor and unsophisticated country-dwellers, though the reality was almost certainly very different. Galilee may well have been despised by the inhabitants of a city like Jerusalem, with Jesus' home village of Nazareth singled out for particular disdain (John 1:46), but it was actually one of the most culturally innovative areas of the country at the time, and its relative isolation from the more conservative influences of Jerusalem ensured that its inhabitants would be fully exposed to the more progressive culture of the Roman empire.

It is not easy to estimate the size of ancient populations, but it is generally reckoned that Galilee had more non-Jews than Jewish residents and growing up there it is quite likely that Jesus (and no doubt many of his first disciples) would be familiar with, and quite possibly fluent in, Greek as well as their native Aramaic. Galilee was also the location for two major building projects at the time – the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias – both of them designed on the pattern of urban developments elsewhere in the empire. Sepphoris is of particular interest in relation to Jesus as it was little more than an hour's walk from his home in Nazareth. It was an old city that was extensively rebuilt on a Greco-Roman model at the time when Jesus was growing up. His father Joseph (and therefore probably Jesus himself) was a tektōn, (a Greek word meaning a general builder rather than a 'carpenter', Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), and Sepphoris was so close to Nazareth that it seems highly likely that Jesus himself will have been involved in this work of reconstruction. It was an impressive place, with a large theatre as well as a royal palace, market place, and a public bath house featuring a complex water supply system – all of them adorned by artistic frescoes. The Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100) called it 'the ornament of Galilee', set on the top of a significant hill. When Jesus encouraged his disciples to be 'the light of the world' because 'a city built on a hill cannot be hidden' (Matthew 5:14, NRSV) was he referring to Sepphoris, whose illuminated streets must have created quite a glow in the night time sky? Or when he accused his religious opponents of being 'hypocrites', was that inspired by actors he had seen in the theatre (the Greek word hypokritēs meaning someone who plays a part, often wearing a mask), suggesting that they were just play acting when it came to faith, and their only reward would be applause at the end of a performance (Matthew 6:2)? There is no mention in the New Testament of Jesus ever visiting either Sepphoris or Tiberias, which was a similar city, though since the one was near his boyhood home and the other was right in the

centre of the area where much of Jesus' ministry took place and close to Bethsaida, the home of several of his earliest disciples, it is probable that he will have done so. People from Tiberias certainly followed him (John 6:23), and in both these cities it would have been easier to associate with 'gluttons, drunkards, tax gatherers and sinners' (Matthew 11:19, author's translation) than in the more traditionally religious places around Jerusalem.

Early Christianity

Within twenty years of Jesus' crucifixion, every major population centre in the Roman world had at least one group of his followers. The list of nationalities present in Jerusalem to hear the disciple Peter's first public address reads like a roll-call of visitors from every corner of the empire: 'We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia…' (Acts 2:9–11). Their inclusion at this point in the Christian story was obviously not just wishful thinking, for very soon after this occasion there is hard evidence of thriving Christian communities in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Antioch in Syria, and many other Mediterranean cities (Acts 8:26–39), not to mention far-flung places such as Alexandria in Egypt, or Ethiopia, or Byzantium.

Radical lifestyle

Jesus and his first disciples were relatively well-off. As a general builder in an area of intensive development Joseph and his family will not have been poor, nor were any of the other disciples whose circumstances are known to us. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had fishing businesses that were sufficiently well established to allow them to take time out to be with Jesus while their employees continued to run the business (Mark 1:16–20), Matthew was a tax collector (an occupation well known for making money on the side, Matthew 9:9–13), and many of the stories of Jesus show him having easy access to people with cash. Jesus laid down no hard and fast rules for his disciples to follow, though he himself chose to live a simple life, and there was always a radical edge to his teaching. When a rich man wanted to become a disciple, he was told, 'Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor' (Mark 10:21), and it is difficult not to conclude that Jesus believed a rich person would find it harder to follow him than a poor one (Matthew 19:24) – though even the poor could become obsessed with riches, and they too were expected to give away their last coin in the service of God (Mark 12:41–44). In the light of this it is not surprising that the first Christians created a community based on the mutual sharing of goods. The sharing of goods was not unheard of and was regarded as an ideal by many Greek writers, while some sectarian groups in Palestine insisted that converts must give up their possessions. But in the case of the earliest Christians, such sharing was not dictated by rules but was a spontaneous act of generosity. They did not dispose of everything (Acts 4:36–5:11) but sold things as the need arose and then shared the profits with the rest of the Christian community (Acts 2:45).

This early experiment in community living is never mentioned specifically after the early chapters of the book of Acts. Maybe it broke down because they ran out of goods and in their enthusiasm they forgot to balance a sharing of goods with a sharing of labour, with the result that they disposed of the resources they already had but could find no way of replenishing them. Yet generosity was one of the distinctive hallmarks of the church in the first century. It is recommended repeatedly by Paul in his letters, and demonstrated in the way that the church at Antioch in Syria sent a gift to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27–30), as did Paul's Gentile

churches a bit later (Romans 15:22–29), not to mention his constant reminders to those who were better off of the need to support the others (1 Corinthians 11:20–22). Whatever the practical challenges of putting it into action, this radical approach to material goods would be attractive to communities throughout the Roman empire. While some converts came from the higher social classes, owning their own villas and running successful businesses, vast numbers were much poorer, living in overcrowded tenements and constantly struggling for survival.

New faith

It was not long before these new followers of Jesus began to make their presence felt even in Rome itself. Writing of events in AD 49, the Roman historian Suetonius described a series of riots that led the emperor Claudius to expel the Jewish population from the city. There are questions over how such a policy might have been enforced, as the Jews played a significant role in the commercial infrastructure of the city. But Suetonius identified the cause of all the trouble as a person called ‘Chrestus’ (Life of Claudius 25.4). It is possible that this refers to an individual of that name, but there is good reason to think that the conflicts described by Suetonius stemmed from arguments over the teaching of those Roman Jews who had become followers of Jesus, and were hailing him as their expected ‘Messiah’ (a Hebrew term, whose equivalent in Latin was Christus (Christos in Greek), and which could well have been reported as ‘Chrestus’ by someone not entirely familiar with the details of the debates). Though the New Testament is dominated by Paul, it is clear that he was not the only itinerant preacher who was actively sharing the Christian message in the urban centres of the empire though of the original disciples of Jesus, Peter is the only one of whom we have certain knowledge in this respect – another indication that an upbringing in Galilee equipped him to communicate effectively in the culture of Roman cities (1 Corinthians 9:5).

Opposition

It was not long before the popular media of the Roman world turned their attention to these followers of Jesus, describing their activities in lurid terms and portraying them not only as people with weird religious ideas, but a threat to the safety and security of the Roman state:

The Christians form among themselves secret societies that exist outside the system of laws… an obscure and mysterious community founded on revolt and on the advantage that accrues from it.… They form a rabble of profane conspiracy. Their alliance consists in meetings at night with solemn rituals and inhuman revelries.… They despise temples as if they were tombs. They disparage the gods and ridicule our sacred rites.… Just like a rank growth of weeds, the abominable haunts where this impious confederacy meet are multiplying all over the world.… To venerate an executed criminal and… the wooden cross on which he was executed is to erect altars which befit lost and depraved wretches.

Origen, Against Celsus 8.17; 3.14; Minucius Felix, Octavius 8.4; 9.1–6

The Christians saw things differently. Far from worshipping ‘an executed criminal’, they firmly believed that their Jesus was no longer dead, but had risen again after his execution and was not only alive but accompanying them wherever they went (Acts 2:32). This was perhaps the one crucial factor which ensured the lasting success of the whole Christian enterprise. Because they believed that Jesus was not dead, but alive, his first followers were prepared to take the most incredible risks in spreading their message. Beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and persecutions of all kinds – even death – were commonplace (Acts 12:1–5; 2 Corinthians 11:23–27), but the extraordinary outcome of their endeavours made even the suffering infinitely worthwhile.

Changing the world

We look back on all this with the benefit of hindsight: we know that the church did in fact succeed, though at the time this can hardly have seemed like a foregone conclusion. By normal standards, everything was against them. Jesus was a Jew, as were all his original disciples, and though in some circles in the Roman empire the Jewish faith was respected, anti-Semitism was common and there was particular disdain for those Jews who lived in Palestine, who were often regarded by the Roman establishment as an incomprehensible, fanatical, and unbalanced race. In addition, coming from Galilee neither Jesus nor his followers were ever part of the Jewish establishment. It was hard enough for such people to gain a hearing even in their own local religious capital, Jerusalem, let alone to communicate effectively with educated Greeks and Romans in the wider world which they had never previously visited. Yet this is precisely what they did, as a movement that began spontaneously in a country on the edge of Roman civilization suddenly became an important social and political, as well as religious, force at the very centre of life in the empire. So what was their secret? Why did Jesus' followers feel compelled to take his message to the furthest corners of the world they knew? Why were they not content to stay at home and become a reforming movement within their own Jewish faith? And just how did they manage to communicate the message of Jesus so successfully to the cultured inhabitants of ancient cities in Italy and Greece?

To find the answers to these questions, we need first to understand the world where they lived, which itself was far from homogeneous, and encompassed two significant and distinctive contexts: the Greek and Roman, and the Jewish and Palestinian.

PART 1

CONTEXT AND CULTURE

CHAPTER 1

GREEKS AND ROMANS

Hellenism

In the world of the first Christians, the outward forms of administration and government were those of the Roman empire, but its cultural roots were embedded in a different world altogether that goes back to the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) and his Greek empire. The Romans were highly skilled in technology, building impressive roads and water supply systems wherever they went, but the underlying ideology and structures of civic life, the way children were educated, and the practice of religious faith as well as the dominance of the Greek language – all this and more derived from pre-Roman times.

Alexander had risen to fame almost overnight. He began as the son of a little-known local ruler in Macedonia, but was such a brilliant general that within a very short time he was able to defeat armies far more prestigious than his own, and establish himself as undisputed emperor of the whole of the world that was then known to people living in the Mediterranean lands. The Persian empire fell first, followed by Egypt, and ultimately by other territory even further afield, and by the time Alexander died at the young age of thirty-three his empire stretched from Greece in the west to the Indian sub-continent in the east. Alexander had no obvious heir, and there was much squabbling among his military commanders as they jostled for position to succeed him. It took another twenty years before the succession was finally resolved, in which his territories were divided between the various protagonists. Almost 300 years later they were finally reunited, when the Roman Octavian, later known as Augustus (63 BC–AD 14), incorporated the lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea into his own empire.

Octavian was himself a brilliant strategist. But he owed much of his lasting success to the fact that there was already a cultural unity among almost all the nations which he had conquered. In spite of their diverse national traditions, people throughout the Mediterranean world were deeply conscious of being part of a wider world. They spoke the same language – Greek – and the inhabitants of

both east and west had common hopes, similar educational opportunities, and much the same understanding of life. All this sprang directly from the genius of Alexander the Great. One of his near-contemporaries, Isocrates (436–338 BC), could claim with some justification that ‘the name Greek suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and the title “Greek” is applied to those who share our culture rather than to those who share the same blood’ (Panegyricus 50). In his youth Alexander was a student of the philosopher Aristotle, and he never forgot what he had learned from him. Alexander was a fanatic for his own native culture, and was genuinely convinced that civilization had reached its ultimate high point with the Greek way of life. He was determined to share it with the whole world, and took steps to ensure that Greek customs, religion, philosophy, and language would be adopted throughout his domains. New cities were built in the Greek style, incorporating temples, theatres, and sports arenas. The way of life that resulted – ‘Hellenism’ – lasted for nearly a thousand years after Alexander’s death, and had a profound impact on the future course of the whole of European civilization. The early centuries of Christianity were dominated by the need to engage with this monolithic worldwide culture, and church leaders eventually found themselves forced to articulate, even to redefine, their faith in terms of the Hellenistic worldview.

The degree to which any particular nation adopted this Greek culture naturally varied from place to place. Sometimes the changes were only superficial. The names of local gods and goddesses might be changed into Greek forms, but their worship often continued much the same as it had always been. In addition, ordinary working people had little time or opportunity for philosophical debates and sports activities, and it was generally the ruling classes who became most involved in such pursuits. They were also the ones who were most at home with the Greek language, for it meant they could make international contacts without the tedious necessity of learning several languages. But Greek influence was everywhere, and in one way or another its impact was felt in all sections of society. This Greek-dominated world offered some obvious benefits to the earliest Christians as they sought to share their message with others. There were few language problems, cultural barriers were minimal, and by the Roman age great roads were being built which would make it easy to travel from one part of the empire to another.

Civic society

Roman society was highly regulated along lines of social class, and while it was not impossible to move from one class to another it was not something that happened every day and most people simply accepted the social circumstance into which they had been born. Individuals were able to improve their status through education or distinguished military service, but ownership of land was the real key to civic influence. This is what determined who could belong to the two major aristocratic groupings in Rome: the senators and knights (or equestrians).

Decision-makers and bureaucrats

The main qualification for membership of the senate was ownership of property worth at least a million sesterces, though in order to be an actual member it was necessary to be appointed to a formal position in the city of Rome itself. A typical member of a senatorial family might finish his education around the age of twenty, then be given some junior bureaucratic position, which might be followed by a period of military service (often in a managerial rather than a combative position), after which a good candidate could expect to become a quaestor (finance officer), which carried with it a senate seat. Then he could expect to become a praetor (a legal position), and for the most talented that might be followed by an appointment as a consul or provincial governor. By and large, the early Christians tended not to come into direct contact with this level of Roman governance, though there are some exceptions. When Paul and Barnabas visited the island of Cyprus, they were invited into the court of the proconsul Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:7), and Paul also met with Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, in the more formal setting of his legal tribunal (Acts 18:12–17). He later came face to face in a judicial setting with Felix and Festus, procurators of Judea (Acts 23:23–26:32). These procurators were the bureaucrats and civil servants of the empire, and Festus appears to have been a member of the equestrian order while Felix was a ‘freedman’: he was from a family of slaves who had been granted their freedom, whose appointment led Tacitus to comment that ‘he exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave’ (Histories 5.9).

Slavery

Slavery was commonplace, and according to some estimates accounted for a fifth of the entire population of Rome. Defeated armies were regularly enslaved, along with children who were abandoned or sold by their parents and individuals who chose to sell themselves into slavery. Aristotle summed up a widespread belief: ‘the slave is a living tool, and the tool a lifeless slave’ (Nicomachean Ethics 8.11). Slaves had no legal rights and were regarded as less than human, though the treatment any slave received depended on the attitude of his or her owner. Slaves in industrial situations such as working in mines or on sea-going ships invariably had a hard time, though household slaves were often entrusted with important positions in civic and domestic life. Slaves were banned from marrying though there are many examples of slaves forming intimate long-term relationships, having children, and living in something resembling a family, often in the context of a larger Roman household where their owners gave them security and protection in return for their loyalty and obedience.

Slaves appear frequently on the pages of the New Testament, often as part of the extended households of the equestrian classes, whose villas frequently provided housing as well as employment for significant numbers of people. In socio-economic terms, these slaves occupied the same sort of niche as regular employees in today’s world, even earning ‘wages’ in the form of money that – though it was still legally owned by their masters – was available for the slaves to spend. Many of them saved this up in order to buy their freedom, which was often done in the context of a ceremony in a religious context (which could include the Jewish synagogues). Since a slave was not entitled to enter into a legal contract, the idea was that the deity would do that on the slave’s behalf, with the price of freedom being paid into the temple coffers. A fraternal club could also serve the same purpose, and at a later date churches operated in this capacity. This is the context in which Paul encouraged Philemon to grant freedom to his slave Onesimus, and it is often thought that this whole process of paying a ransom to a third party is the background against which Paul’s language describing the freedom of faith in Christ is best understood, rather than invoking sacrificial imagery from the Hebrew scriptures (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians

6:19; 7:22–23; Galatians 3:13; 4:5).

Adoption

Another common procedure that could lead to change in a person's status was the practice of adoption, something that could happen at any age and which generally marked the start of a new life for the one adopted. This represented a far more thoroughgoing reorientation of lifestyle – and future prospects – than would be the case today. To be adopted meant the cancellation of all one's debts, and a total reversal of an individual's previous fortunes so that the adopted person not only took on the name of his or her new family but was entitled to all the privileges of that family, including full rights of inheritance. In return, of course, the adoptee came under the control of the new family's head (invariably the father), who determined the future course of his or her life while offering safety, security, and family solidarity in exchange. In other words, an adopted person enjoyed exactly the same status as a person born into the family – something that Paul used as an appropriate metaphor for the gifts of God's grace experienced through faith in Christ (Galatians 4:5; Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Ephesians 1:5).

Citizenship

One further category worth noting is that of citizenship. In the earliest days, you were a citizen of whatever city or province you happened to be born into. But almost from the beginning Roman citizenship was not limited to the city of Rome itself, as provincial alliances with different areas of Italy were forged, and Augustus took things a stage further so that citizenship became a mark of distinction unrelated to the place of one's birth. Paul was a Roman citizen and he exemplifies this principle very well as he could quite easily be regarded as a citizen of two cities: of Tarsus, his birthplace (Acts 21:39), and of Rome (Acts 22:26–27) – even though, at that point in his life, it is unclear whether he had ever been to the city. This is another theme that Paul used to illustrate his understanding of Christian faith, insisting that there was no incompatibility between being a good citizen of Rome as well as owing loyalty to a 'citizenship… in heaven' (Philippians 3:20, NRSV), which involved being 'no longer strangers and aliens, but… citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:19, NRSV).

An individual could become a citizen through various routes: by being born to parents who were already citizens, as a reward for some special service on behalf of the empire (either commercial or military), or even as part of a package of privileges granted to freed slaves. Though in theory these various ways to gain citizenship were of equal status, Paul seems to have gained some advantage from being born as a citizen when he came to negotiate with Claudius Lysias, a military man who only became a citizen by paying a large sum of money (Acts 22:28). By New Testament times, citizenship involved very few formal duties other than loyalty to the empire, though it bestowed important privileges, including exemption from degrading punishments such as beatings or crucifixion, and the right to appeal to the courts in Rome over the head of the local judiciary – both of which feature in the stories of Paul.

Religion

The fundamental focus of traditional Greek and Roman faith was not on some other world, but on everyday life in this world. The idea that belief might constitute a discrete category that could be considered in isolation from the rest of life would have made no sense to either Greeks or Romans. It was concerned with ensuring that the correct observances were carried out in such a way that society's ongoing security and prosperity could be assured. Matters of abstract belief – whether about God or the nature of the world and its people – were at best secondary, and devotion was expressed through acts of respect directed towards the deities, with different gods or goddesses being recognized for their influence in different circumstances and at different stages of life. For this reason it is misleading to speak of Greek or Roman 'religion' as if it was some special belief system comparable to Protestant Christianity. Religious observance, in which the intrinsic reality of the gods and goddesses was recognized, was simply an everyday part of life that was intended to preserve social stability, whether in the context of rites of passage or of legal transactions or military expeditions, or any other concern that people may have. For all these reasons, the underlying emphasis was never on the individual, but on the community and its well-being. The notion of having a personal relationship with one of the gods would simply not have occurred to anyone as being either desirable or possible. All the practices and traditional rituals were designed to maintain the well-being of the community by ensuring the observance of the correct social forms at the right times and in the right places. This could easily be done, for example, by the head of a household acting on behalf of all members of a family, or by local magistrates as representatives of an entire community. Appropriate sites for devotion did not need to be specially constructed shrines or temples, and many thousands of herms (stone pillars with the head of the god Hermes on top and a phallic symbol in front) have been discovered at roadsides, or on street corners, inviting passers-by to seek the protection of this particular deity, while recognizing the process as a way of affirming their solidarity with the community in which the herm was located.

The gods

Hellenistic religion had no organized central structure that could impose a uniform belief system, and though individual gods and goddesses had their own priests there was no recognized professional priesthood. Authority in religious matters generally rested with those who had secular power, which in the household meant the father while in a civic context it would be the local magistrates or even the assembly of all citizens. The most important religious functionaries were often seers, who would deliver oracles interpreting the divine will to any who asked their opinion – which they did, on matters as diverse as personal guidance, healing, the development of national policies, or military campaigns. The oracle at Delphi was one of the most highly respected sources of such spiritual insight. Sacrifice was a common way to gain the favour of the gods, most often of animals though corn or fruit could also be offered. Far from being a gloomy occasion, this was generally a time for festivity and celebration, for only the poorest parts of sacrificial victims were actually offered to the gods, with the best cuts of meat then being eaten in a communal banquet. There was of course a serious side to it all and worshippers regularly made offerings in order to win some particular favour from the deity. This was understood not so much as an attempt to bribe the gods, but more as a way of affirming that the human-divine relationship was a mutually beneficial one that operated in predictable ways in a rational and orderly universe.

The conventional framework of divinities within which all this operated was traditionally traced back to the work of Homer, a blind poet whose life and times remain shrouded in mystery with no agreed consensus about either his dates or the exact location in which he flourished – or, for that matter, whether he penned the epic poems attributed to him. These poems consist of the sort of traditional stories that can be found in the heritage of many nations, with ballads and stories of long-forgotten wars and heroes that will have been passed on orally from one generation to another long before anyone thought that they should be written down. In these narratives, twelve gods and goddesses were identified by name as the key deities in the pantheon. They each had their own quite narrow sphere of influence, and citizens would not typically choose to follow only their own

favourites but would pay homage to them all so as to ensure that every aspect of human experience might be blessed by divine attention. They were generally thought of as living in an extended family at Zeus's palace on Mount Olympus (hence the term 'Olympians' by which they were often known), and they were described in very anthropomorphic terms. The way they lived was depicted in ways that closely paralleled the organization of human society, though they did have some crucial differences from ordinary people, not least in their ability to assume different shapes in different spaces and the fact that they could neither grow old nor die. So notwithstanding their many human-like qualities, ordinary mortals always had to have regard for the difference between divinity and humanity. If there had been a golden age when gods and people mingled freely with one another, that time was long since past, and for now there was a great gulf between the two modes of existence.

Though this way of looking at things had its origin in Greek culture, by the end of the third century BC the Romans had adopted it as their own and were identifying the Greek deities with their own traditional gods and goddesses. There were variations from time to time with regard to those deities that might be included in the twelve most important ones, but by New Testament times there would have been general agreement, along the lines of the following list:

The twelve Olympians

ZEUS

Chief god, father of other gods and patron of male authority; Roman Jupiter (Jove).

HERA

Sister and consort of Zeus, goddess of women and marriage; Roman Juno.

ATHENA

Goddess of wisdom and the arts; Roman Minerva.

APOLLO

God of sun, prophecy, music, medicine, poetry, and a model to inspire young men; no direct Roman equivalent.

ARTEMIS

Twin sister of Apollo, goddess of the country and of wild animals, and protector of women in childbirth; Roman Diana.

POSEIDON

Brother of Zeus, and god of sea and earthquakes, as well as patron of horse riders; Roman Neptune.

APHRODITE

Goddess of fertility and beauty; patron of sexuality; Roman Venus.

HERMES

God of commerce, invention, cunning, theft; messenger for other gods; patron of travellers and rogues; conductor of the dead to Hades; Roman Mercury.

HEPHAESTUS

Disabled god of fire, and patron of craftworkers; Roman Vulcan.

ARES

God of war; Roman Mars.

DEMETER

Goddess of agriculture; Roman Ceres.

DIONYSUS

God of wine, ecstasy and orgasm; Roman Bacchus.

In addition to these, there was the god Hades (Roman Pluto), who was thought of as another brother of Zeus in charge of death and the underworld. He, and others like him, were known as the 'chthonians' (from the Greek word chthon, meaning 'earth'), though they were not imagined to be in opposition to the Olympians either morally or spiritually. Not all chthonians were representative of negative influences, though deities of the underworld and of death were certainly prominent among them. But there were also positive gods within their ranks: food, for instance, grows in the earth, and even Zeus could have an earth-bound, chthonic aspect to his character. Indeed, most of the leading gods had an endless list of attributes applied to them which defy neat classification. Individual communities constantly sought to define the qualities and powers of their particular deities as being in some way distinctive and different from the wider spirituality that was shared with other people throughout the Hellenistic world – so, for example, the 'Zeus of mountain tops' had qualities not possessed by 'Zeus of the city', or (to give an example that features in the New Testament), 'Artemis of Ephesus' (Acts 19:28) was capable of bestowing blessings and favours that would not be available to devotees of Artemis as she was revered in other cities.

Though it does not feature prominently, there are traces of this traditional pantheon at various other points in the New Testament. When Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra, the crowd concluded that 'the gods have come down to us in human form!' (Acts 14:11, NRSV) – and went on to identify Barnabas as Zeus (presumably because he impressed them as being suitably regal, and silent) and Paul as Hermes (because he was the one who did all the talking on behalf of his more distinguished-looking companion). Their eagerness to connect the two apostles with the gods may have been encouraged by the story of a previous occasion when the same two deities had visited a local couple incognito, and they subsequently reaped a considerable reward for the hospitality they had

unknowingly offered them (Ovid, Metamorphoses 8.626–30). Contrary to initial impressions, for Paul to be identified with Hermes may well have been the higher accolade, for Hermes was regarded as a lovable rogue whose mischievous antics were highly admired. An earlier episode in the book of Acts possibly reflects a similar (though less categorical) identification of a Christian with a traditional deity, when Simon Magus declared Philip to be 'the power of God that is called Great' (Acts 8:10, NRSV). Another allusion to these traditional categories of divinity may also occur in 1 Corinthians 8:5 where, in the process of an argument about whether pagan gods really existed at all, Paul refers to 'so-called gods in heaven [the Olympians?] and earth [the chthonians?]…' (author's translation).

By New Testament times, in addition to the Olympians and chthonians (who could be traced back to the Homeric epics), there was also a third group who might be revered, namely the heroes. As their name implies, they were not of the same high standing as the gods, not least because they started off as humans. The first mention of them occurs in Hesiod (about 700 BC), who depicts them as deceased individuals whose lifetime accomplishments were of sufficient distinction to ensure their continued existence which therefore endowed them with the potential for influencing the welfare of those who were still living. In practice, they tended to be adopted as local divinities, and their relics and tombs became centres of devotion. Typical examples mentioned in the New Testament might be the twin brothers Castor and Pollux who formed the figurehead of the ship on which Paul travelled to Rome (Acts 28:11), and who seem to have transcended the boundaries between humanity and divinity so as to be regarded as patrons and protectors of sailors in stormy waters.

Civic religion

In the New Testament period, religious practices in the form of regular devotions were all directed towards affirming the stability of the political system. Roman society was built on the twin foundations of law and a respect for tradition. In earlier Greek society the role of the individual had played a significant part even in civic religion, but Roman religiosity was always a corporate affair that was to be regulated by due processes of obligation and honour. The notion that state and faith might be separated would have made no sense in the Greco-Roman world, and a state without a faith would have been as meaningless as a faith without a state. The idea that the two can be held apart is a post-Enlightenment idea that runs contrary to the expectations of all ancient people (and can also be seen today as secular Western governments struggle to understand the more holistic mindset of the Islamic world). There was no aspect of public life that was untouched by religious duty and the performance of appropriate ceremonies was taken for granted in every sphere of life. Each city had its own patron deity who protected it and ensured its future, and making due acknowledgment of this reality was crucial for the people's continued well-being. Part of the genius of the Romans was their willingness to incorporate existing local deities into their own grand pantheon. This is why the Roman and Greek divinities could be so closely connected. In identifying the Greek Zeus with the Roman Jupiter the Romans were not saying that Zeus was also Jupiter, but that they were one and the same divine entity. By the same logic, local deities could easily be incorporated into the overall picture even though the fit might sometimes look to be less than perfect. This inclusivity made good political sense, because it allowed conquered people to continue living more or less as they had before. Jewish and Christian resistance to this was a source of much misunderstanding, for to the Roman mind there could be no harm in continuing the traditional ways, and even giving exclusive worship to one particular god while acknowledging the existence of others.

Civic religion naturally was concentrated on civic life, and shrines of various kinds were easy to find in the streets of any Hellenistic city. The main qualification for being a priest was an understanding of the ritual and legal

requirements necessary to ensure that things were done properly. Priests were generally appointed by the city authorities, though in some places it was possible to purchase a priestly position. When it was available this was considered to be a good investment as it could secure a family's future. As well as presiding over regular rituals, a priest would also have significant administrative duties and in large centres there might easily be several assistants who were employed for this. Such assistants were especially numerous in Asia Minor, and they would function in much the same way as a sacristan in a church today. When Paul visited Ephesus he learned that the entire city regarded itself as being responsible for this role (Acts 19:35). Indeed, the significance of 'Artemis of the Ephesians' (Acts 19:28) for the life of Ephesus provides a good example of the part played by a local deity in civic affairs. Artemis is specifically identified here as 'of the Ephesians', a designation that suggests she started off as a local divinity who subsequently became identified with the Artemis of the classical Greek pantheon. Many statues of this particular manifestation of Artemis have been uncovered and the Artemis temple in Ephesus was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In New Testament times, it was serviced by a large number of priests, both female and male, all of whom were committed to sexual abstinence for the year in which they served. In spite of the fact that she was depicted adorned with oval protrusions that look like either breasts or eggs there is no convincing evidence to suggest that Artemis was a fertility goddess whose worship involved sexual activity: her major function was to guard the city and ensure the ongoing stability of its life.

The most important job of a priest would be to offer sacrifices, for s/he was the person who knew the right way to do this. The rationale behind sacrifice was not always the same in every place, but for the Romans it was commonly regarded as a way of sustaining the deities and ensuring that their power to help people would never be exhausted. When Paul and Barnabas were hailed as deities in Lystra, the priest of Zeus produced oxen adorned with garlands ready to be sacrificed for them (Acts 14:13) in a scene that is reminiscent of inscriptions on many monuments of the time. To be efficacious, a sacrifice had to follow strict guidelines which typically included offerings of wine and incense as well as the slaughter of an animal. The actual killing would usually be done by slaves, though under the supervision of a priest who would then examine the dead animal's entrails as a way of divining a message for the worshippers, who would typically then feast on the meat once it was cooked. Frescoes depict music being

played at sacrifices, perhaps to drive away hostile spirits or please the gods – but also no doubt serving the practical purpose of drowning the shrieks of the animals as they were being slaughtered.

The priests themselves were invariably rewarded by being given a portion of the meat for themselves and if they wished they could sell this to the general public. All this is reflected in the situation addressed by Paul in Corinth, where some Christians were wondering if it was permissible for them to eat meat obtained from this source. Their fear was that it might have been contaminated by the religious ceremonies in which the animals had been slaughtered. The fact that such a question could be asked at all shows that some Christians shared the widely held opinion that, even if they never worshipped them, other gods than their own did truly exist – otherwise, how could they possibly have imagined that non-existent divinities might affect their food one way or the other? Paul himself pointed out the inconsistency in such an idea but still recognized that, however unfounded such concerns might be, they were nevertheless a very real concern for others whom he regarded as 'weak believers' (1 Corinthians 8:11). In the course of dealing with this and related matters, he mentions all the traditional practices of a typical Greek temple: eating a meal as part of the worship (8:10), buying temple meat in the market for consumption in the home (10:25), and he even uses the practice of priests receiving their share of the sacrificial meat as an encouragement to the Christians to support those who served in their own communities (9:13). Excavations within the city of Corinth have demonstrated that this was a distinctive aspect of life there, with temples equipped with specially designed suites of rooms for communal eating – the ancient equivalent of a restaurant, where citizens could meet their friends and rent space for special celebrations. Animal sacrifice was not the only element of worship in the temples of the Roman empire. Vegetables and cooked food such as bread might also be sacrificed, while the pouring out of wine or water was such a widely known custom that Paul could use it metaphorically to describe how he felt towards the end of his life as he faced his own uncertain future (Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6).

While sacrifices could be offered at any time on behalf of individuals or particular groups within the community, the guardian divinities of the cities all

had their annual festivals which were a time for carnivals and processions as well as athletic games and artistic exhibitions – all of them watched over by the divine patron of the city, and serving a civic function by encouraging a sense of corporate solidarity among different elements of the population and thereby affirming the structures of city government and those who were responsible for its smooth operation.

Domestic religion

Awareness of the gods and their influence on human life was not limited to the civic sphere, and home life was also infused with a sense of the divine. Meals would begin and end with the offering of food to the gods, and the entrance to a home would be marked by a shrine that ensured the safety of the inhabitants. In this context various minor deities played a significant part: Vesta, goddess of the hearth, and Janus, god of the doorway who had two heads because he needed to look in two directions at once in order to protect the house adequately. All significant family events and rites of passage were marked by ceremonial observances within the home and it was the duty of the head of the household, acting on behalf of all other members of the family, to ensure that things were done properly. This included not only daily devotional observances but also the distinctive rites that marked times of birth, death, puberty, marriage, and so on. The extent to which an individual's identity was subsumed in the life of the community can be judged by reference to the way the dead were traditionally regarded in Roman thinking – as impersonal beings, stored away in a sort of limbo world of non-being. By New Testament times Greek ideas about the significance of the individual had started to change this, but it was some time later before any coherent view of a meaningful after-life was to emerge, and then it was largely under Christian influence.

Funeral rites provide a good illustration of the nature of religious observance that was centred on the home. Disposal of a body was an urgent matter, not only because of the fear of ritual contamination through its presence, but also because a proper burial was important for the peace of the departed. In ancient Greece the preferred method was burial which would either be in the ground or in an elaborate monumental tomb. Cremation was also practised, though nothing like as universally as it was in Rome where it was the predominant custom until the second century AD, when burial became more fashionable simply because it lent itself to the construction of impressive grave sites to preserve an individual's memory and reputation. Meals played an important part in Greek and Roman funerals, not only at the time of death but regularly during the first year thereafter and then annually on the anniversary of the deceased's birthday. Such

meals were not parties but were an intrinsic aspect of the religious observances commemorating the dead, and often included the provision of food for them that would be administered through tubes that went down into the grave. This was such an important matter that rich people regularly made provision for these meals in their wills, while the poor often became members of funeral clubs that offered them friendship during life and the assurance that somebody would continue to care for them in death. It is likely that people in the wider culture were able to make sense of the emergence of Christian communities by regarding them as voluntary associations of this sort. There is little direct evidence for Christian funeral practices in the first century AD, but by the second century many of these Hellenistic conventions were being followed, albeit with significant alterations. The meals typically became celebrations of the Eucharist and took place not on a person's birthday but on the anniversary of their death, which was now regarded not as the end but as the beginning of a new resurrection life. Jewish communities in the Hellenistic cities generally continued the Palestinian practice of a second burial after the decomposition of a body, when the bones would be gathered up into an ossuary, which was a plaster container specially designed for the purpose. The way in which these ossuaries were decorated (or not) has revealed a great deal about the ways in which different elements within a Jewish population might either accept, or resist, Hellenistic culture. In Rome, for instance, ossuary designs have made it possible to identify considerable diversity of opinion in the way that different sections of the Jewish community related to the wider culture. Some clearly remained faithful to the traditional ban on any sort of decoration for fear that it might transgress the first commandment on 'graven images' (Exodus 20:4), while others happily accepted such innovations and also embraced Latin names for themselves. This sort of evidence reinforces the possibility that Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome could have been due to arguments within the Jewish community about the Christian message and it also suggests that the existence of many different home churches in that city (as documented in Romans 16:1–16) may have been due not to geographical and social factors but to differences of opinion about how Christian faith should relate to the wider culture.

The main focus of Roman society had always been on the life of the community rather than that of the individual, though by New Testament times that had changed somewhat through the influence of the more individualistic Greek

outlook. But the family unit was still all-important, something that can be seen in numerous New Testament passages. When Peter met with Cornelius, it was not a private encounter but involved his entire household becoming Christians (Acts 10:2, 33, 44–48), and much the same pattern was followed with Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15) and the jailer in the same city who was encouraged by Paul and Silas to 'believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household' (Acts 16:31–34, NRSV). The importance of the household is everywhere taken for granted in the New Testament as being the fundamental structure on which the Christian communities were to be modelled. It is not surprising that Paul should have operated like this, for he was a Roman citizen and had a good idea as to how the gospel might best be received within that culture. But he was clearly not the only one to recognize this, and when he came to write to the Christians of Rome, a place he had never visited up to that point, the greetings he sent to them clearly demonstrate that the church in that city was not some monolithic public assembly, but a network of groups meeting in different homes (Romans 16:1–16).

Religion and the emperor

The granting of divine honours to the Roman emperors raised many questions for the early Christians, and their refusal to acknowledge his deity often led to persecution. This most often occurred on a spontaneous local basis, but there could also be more organized and extensive campaigns against them such as happened in the time of Nero (37–68 AD). This became such a major issue because faith in the emperor could never be separated out as a ‘religious’ matter that did not impinge on a person’s civic allegiance. To be a good citizen automatically involved giving due honour to the emperor, because he was the very embodiment of civic values and good order.

The possibility of a human becoming divine could be traced back to the story of Rome’s foundation in 753 BC by the feral twins Romulus and Remus who were believed to be the sons of Mars, the god of war. There are different opinions as to whether these brothers were real historical persons, but regardless of that a key factor in relation to the later cult of the emperor is the fact that after his death Romulus came to be thought of as divine and was revered as the god Quirinus. The idea that rulers were divine was widespread in the ancient world, and the Greek perception of there being only a thin line between humanity and divinity, with the heroes being regarded as individuals who had transcended that boundary in recognition of the accomplishment of some outstanding deed, was easily adapted to suit notions of the emperor’s divine status. It was not so much based on a transcendent view of him as an individual, but rather reflected an appreciation of blessings bestowed by rulers on ordinary mortals that were of such magnitude that they seemed to be the sort of thing that only the gods could accomplish. Referring to a widely accepted opinion, Aristotle noted that ‘men become gods by excess of virtue’ (Nicomachean Ethics 7.1).

The line between divine status and god-like accomplishments was always going to be easy to cross. Julius Caesar had no hesitation in agreeing to the

construction of a statue of himself with the inscription Deo Invicto (‘to the unconquerable god’), though it was only after his death that he was formally recognized as such by a decree of the senate. But it was Augustus who embedded this ideology in the institutions of the state. He was well placed to do so, having been Caesar’s adopted son, which logically then made him ‘son of god’ and from the outset of his rule he used this title in the wider empire, though not at first in Rome itself. Roman culture was always going to be more receptive to the idea that emperors attained fully divine status only at death. Politically, of course, the notion of the emperor as divine was a masterstroke in terms of gaining the allegiance of far-flung provinces. Most people would never get to visit Rome, and even fewer were likely to be familiar with the intellectual values of the classics of Greek and Latin literature, but for the empire to be identified with an individual such as the emperor made it accessible and knowable. It was possible for the emperor to be seen, through statues and other artwork displayed in the places that people regularly visited in the course of their daily lives – marketplaces, civic buildings, and temples. To refuse to acknowledge the emperor was a statement of resistance to all that Rome stood for. Christians might have had good reason to believe that Nero or Domitian had over-reached their appropriate sphere of authority but that is not how it would have looked from a Roman standpoint, because they were still the embodiment of law and good order, no matter how mad they might have been as individuals. No doubt this explains why Paul, for example, went to such pains to encourage his readers to honour the emperor (Romans 13:1–7), while maintaining the position that Jesus had espoused, of giving to Caesar only those things that rightfully were his (Mark 12:13–17) – though by the time of Domitian (81–96 AD) Christians were preferring to see Rome in a less generous light, as ‘Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’ (Revelation 17:5, NRSV).

The spaces outside the home were equally important in terms of traditional devotion. The ancient Greeks had always regarded nature as being alive with divine connections, and every aspect of the world had its own particular deities. Altars could be found everywhere, in fields or at the roadside just as readily as in temples or by the hearth at home. They provided spaces where homage might be paid to the many deities whose concern was the countryside and the roads and the safety of those who walked in those spaces. The emperor Augustus realized the importance of these devotional sites and when he came to power he ordered

the construction of small shrines that would not only affirm the traditional practices of the people but also, significantly, were dedicated to his own honour. Since travel, work, and home were the things that concerned ordinary people on a daily basis, the religious observances of these realities were almost certainly more deeply embedded in the culture than the more elaborate civic rituals of the large temples and their ostensibly more important divinities.

Philosophy

Alexander the Great had been inspired by a love for the classical Greek philosophers. But by New Testament times their heyday was long past. Those who succeeded the original generation of creative thinkers were not of the same intellectual calibre, and much philosophy was concerned with detailed arguments about things that to ordinary people seemed trivial and irrelevant. But there were some whose ideas were more accessible than others, and who therefore attracted a following among many ordinary citizens.

The Stoics

This outlook was encountered by Paul in Athens (Acts 17:18), and the influence of Stoicism can also be traced elsewhere in the New Testament. Its founder was Zeno (335–263 BC), a native of Cyprus who subsequently moved to Athens where he established his own school in the Stoa Poikile (‘Painted Portico’), from which the name ‘Stoic’ was derived.

Ancient philosophers often searched for a single principle that might be at the centre of everything, and for the Stoics that was ‘Reason’. In order to live the good life, individuals therefore needed to be in tune with ‘Reason’, whether through living in harmony with nature or by following their own conscience, which also was motivated by ‘Reason’. Since this was always a matter of individual choice, Stoic teaching prioritized the importance of living a life of ‘self-sufficiency’. Stoics were widely respected for their high standards of personal morality, and it was not uncommon for them to be prepared to commit suicide sooner than lose their self-respect and dignity (hence the modern use of the term ‘stoic’ to indicate a single-minded devotion to a tough set of challenges). Inevitably, this way of understanding life did not convince everyone – not least because living a life of self-sufficiency hardly began to explain social realities. For if ‘Reason’ filled and inspired everything, then why were all people not the same? Why were so many slaves condemned to eke out a wretched existence? Stoics could claim that, in their minds, slaves were equal to the emperor, but that offered little consolation either to slaves or to those who were concerned for their welfare. For the socially disadvantaged, Stoicism was essentially a philosophy of hopelessness in which most people were considered incapable of reaching any level of maturity.

Like all other philosophical systems of the day, Stoicism consisted of much more than merely a set of rules by which to live. It was a whole worldview that encompassed astronomy, physics, and mathematics, as well as ethics, and all these things were believed to be interconnected. The definition of any sort of divinity was no more central to Stoic philosophy than it was to any other of the

philosophical schools, and insofar as it was ever contemplated, the notion of ‘god’ tended to be an ill-defined abstraction that could sometimes be associated with the whole universe, sometimes with Reason, and sometimes even with features of the natural world such as fire. In the end, though, Seneca’s statement (quoting Virgil) sums up the Stoic understanding of deity: ‘What god we know not, yet a god there dwells’ (Seneca, Letters 41.2).

Of the many philosophical schools of the first-century AD Stoicism is the one that has most often been compared to the New Testament. In particular, Paul is likely to have been familiar with its teachings as some of the most famous Stoic teachers came from his own home city of Tarsus and he may well have learned something about their teachings during his early education there. More than that, though, his style of debate and argument has echoes of the way the Stoics presented their ideas, with regular use of rhetorical questions and short disconnected statements and introducing imaginary opponents to engender debates, as well as the frequent use of illustrations drawn from athletics, the theatre, building, and urban life in general. Aratus, whom Paul quoted in his speech at Athens, was a well-known Stoic poet (Acts 17:28), which at least suggests that he did not entirely discount the possibility of finding ideas that were compatible with Christian faith in the Stoic writings. There are also phrases in his letters that are not inconsistent with Stoic doctrine, even if they do not overtly support it. An example would be the description of the cosmic Christ in Colossians 1:16–17, that ‘all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together’ (RSV). Another would be the way he could describe morality in terms of what is ‘fitting’ or ‘not fitting’ (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:3–4). Of course, in fundamental respects Paul’s worldview was radically different from that of the Stoics and his use of their debating techniques and terminology was all part of his conscious contextualization of his own message about Jesus in the culture of the day.

The Epicureans

This was another popular philosophical group in the Hellenistic age, and is also specifically mentioned in relation to Paul's visit to Athens (Acts 17:18). They too had an ancient pedigree and traced their origin back to the Greek Epicurus (341–270 BC). Though many Greeks had debated what happens at death, Epicureans would have none of it. Death is the end, they said, and the only real way to make sense of life is to be as detached as possible from it. A good life consists in 'pleasure', which for Epicurus meant a more or less abstemious lifestyle characterized by things like friendship and peace of mind, though many of his followers interpreted it differently and gained a reputation for reckless living. Unlike Stoicism, Epicureanism remained substantially unchanged from the views of its founder Epicurus. Much of its worldview was based on his understanding of the physical universe, which involved a complicated theory about the nature of atoms and space. He had a place for deities within this cosmology, though their exact significance is unclear as they played no particular part in his philosophical system, nor were they regarded as impinging at all on human life, either here in this world or in some imaginary afterlife. Religion, for its part, was dismissed as being the source of much human unhappiness because of the judgmental attitudes which it engendered.

For all these reasons, Epicureans and Christians could often find themselves grouped together and labelled as 'atheists' because in their own ways each was indifferent to the traditional deities of conventional civic religion, if not necessarily directly hostile to them. But whereas this aspect of the Epicurean lifestyle was generally regarded as a social curiosity, in the case of the Christians it often led to intense persecution. Other comparisons that have been drawn between Epicureans and Christians relate to the nature of their communities. There are certainly traces of the same words being used, for instance when Paul advised the Christians of Thessalonica to 'aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands… so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one' (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, NRSV). But this was specific advice given in a particular circumstance, and in most respects the two were quite different. Far from being the sort of reclusive

sub-culture represented by Epicureanism, the Christian communities were open to all and ready to play a full part in the life of their cities whenever they had the opportunity to do so.

These two philosophical groups were by no means the only ones to gain a following in New Testament times and there is plenty of evidence of other teachers and systems at the time, many of them local variations of wider trends. On the whole, though, the philosophical movements found their greatest appeal to be among the intellectual and upper classes, with a correspondingly diminished attraction for ordinary people. Apart from their inability to address the fears of the working classes, it was time consuming and intellectually demanding to organize one's life in this way. As a result, philosophy had few points of contact with the majority of the people, who were not highly intellectual and had little opportunity for the leisurely pursuit of ethical debate.

Alternative spiritualities

Questioning the mainstream

The philosophers had often questioned the reality of the traditional Greek and Roman deities by understanding them as symbols of some first force or abstract principle that lay behind the world, and while that did not necessarily lead ordinary citizens either to become atheists or to abandon traditional forms of devotion, it did engender a good deal of cynicism about such things. Philosophical theories might well be dense and incomprehensible, but their criticisms of traditional belief systems sounded a bit too plausible to ignore. While they continued to honour the traditional Greek and Roman deities, everyone knew that many educated people claimed to be able to prove that these gods did not really exist. International movements of trade and people had also made Europeans more conscious of other gods and goddesses who were revered in the eastern part of the Roman empire. Did they exist – and if so, what relevance could they have for life in the urban centres of Greece and Italy? Questions like this eventually led to what can appropriately be described as a failure of nerve in the Hellenistic world. The philosophers had discredited traditional ways of making sense out of life, but they had failed to offer an alternative that could appeal to the masses. As a result significant numbers of people were living in a moral and spiritual vacuum. There was no shortage of rival faiths offering to fill the gap, and people whose confidence in their inherited spiritualities had been eroded were ready to try anything that might give them new hope in an uncertain world.

Countries on the eastern fringe of the Roman empire had their own ancient faiths, which were largely unknown to those living in the urban centres of the west. But the little that was known about them seemed to suggest they were more ‘spiritual’ than the over-rationalized and materialistic worldviews of western thinkers. These factors, combined with a natural curiosity about the unknown, encouraged a growing interest in non-western faiths. In addition, two of the more accessible concerns of Greek philosophy looked as if they might be compatible with these eastern faiths:

In order to explain the existence of evil in the world, philosophers had often argued that this world is neither the only world, nor is it the best. There is, they suggested, another world of goodness and light, and that is the most important sphere of existence. People belong to it because they have a ‘soul’, a spark of light that is related not to bodily existence in this world, but to spiritual existence in the other world. Our brief existence here is merely an unfortunate encumbrance, and to find true meaning and fulfilment it is necessary to escape the body.

Alongside this, but not entirely separate from it, a major concern of many philosophers was what we would today call science (and which they called ‘natural philosophy’, to distinguish it from ‘moral philosophy’). Roman and Greek thinkers were fascinated by the movements of the planets and the stars, which seemed to operate with such precision and regularity that many believed the key to the whole of life was somehow locked up within them. Pythagoras (c.580–500 BC) is best known as a mathematician, but for him this was a spiritual discipline that would enable the soul to focus on the world of the eternal, and thereby work out how to escape the limitations of the body (which he described as ‘the prison of the soul’).

So the way was prepared for the establishment of many oriental religions in the Roman empire. For centuries, astrology had been of great interest to eastern sages. So had the possibility of reincarnation. When these ideas were combined with the conclusions of Greek philosophical scientists they produced a new kind of spiritual movement in the Hellenistic world: the mystery religions.

Mystery religions

Direct personal mystical experiences of the divine played a key role in the various popular spiritual movements which sprang up at this time throughout the Roman empire. There had always been an interest in the mystical, even within official civic religious observance. For example, many state-sponsored shrines incorporated an oracle which could be consulted by city authorities faced with important decisions and also by pilgrims with questions regarding the conduct of their personal lives. An oracle might be represented by a figure of an animal, but was identified with the deity of a particular place offering messages through an accredited medium. Oracles would be consulted for general advice or for specific decisions, and various formal processes might be invoked ranging from the casting of dice to the observing of the entrails of a sacrificial animal, or messages given in a trance-like state. The story in Acts 16:16–18 seems to reflect this background, where Paul and Silas encounter ‘a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination’ (NRSV). The Greek expression used in the original text is obscured by the English translations, for she is described more accurately as having ‘a Pythian spirit’ – a term that probably refers to an episode in the establishment of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, during which the Greek deity Apollo was said to have slain the Python (snake) which was a symbol of the earth goddess in the Minoan rituals that had previously been celebrated at the same site. Healings might also be sought through pilgrimage to the civic shrines and these were often associated with the cult of Asclepius, the patron of medicine who was depicted holding a stick with a serpent coiled around it (a symbol that is still widely associated with the medical profession today). Dreams were also regarded as channels through which ordinary mortals could be contacted by the gods, and Plutarch seems to imply that they were one of the main forms of divine communication, commenting that ‘In popular belief it is only in sleep that men receive inspiration from on high’ (On the Sign of Socrates 20). Paul laid great store by information received in this way (Acts 23:11; 27:23–24), and though dreams can on occasion be distinguished from ‘visions’ (Acts 10:10–16; 16:9–10) it is not entirely clear what the difference might be.

Magic was both feared and widely practised in the first century, though in a

world where many things that we would regard as everyday occurrences were thought to be supernatural, it is not always easy to understand what it was that made something ‘magic’ rather than ‘normal’. When a truly remarkable deed (often a healing) was accomplished by someone who for other reasons was disapproved of, it might easily be dismissed as ‘magic’ whereas a miracle performed by one’s hero would be put down to genuine divine intervention. The Jewish religious authorities appear not to have questioned the reality of Jesus’ healings, but instead claimed he was only able to perform them through the exercise of some malign magical forces (Mark 3:19–22), though when the disciples asked Jesus about someone who was not part of their group he refused to use the same tactic to condemn him (Mark 9:38–41). Similarly, when Philip the evangelist encountered Simon the magician (Simon Magus) in Samaria, he is not condemned for being a magician (Acts 8:11–13) but only subsequently when he offers to purchase the special powers that he believed the apostles to possess (Acts 8:14–24). The reality of magical powers seems to have been accepted by the early church, whether it was the insights of the Magi into the circumstances of Jesus’ birth (Matthew 2:1–12) or the notion that fabric blessed by Paul could convey miraculous healings (Acts 19:11–12), though there was an insistence that such accomplishments had nothing to do with the manipulation of magic spells or charms but depended on the generosity of God (Acts 19:13–19). There was an underlying assumption that an individual’s fate was likely to be determined by unpredictable forces that were in some way connected with the movements of the planets. All of this, and more, is reflected in passages such as Galatians 4:3 and Colossians 2:8, with their insistence that Christians could be more confident of life’s outcomes because they were in the care of a generous God who could be personally known.

This underlying infrastructure of popular spirituality provided a ready breeding ground for the more sophisticated mystical cults associated with the names of Demeter, Dionysus, Isis, Osiris, Serapis, Mithras, and many others that together have come to be referred to as the mystery religions. Though the notion of initiation into a ‘mystery’ was indigenous to Greek culture, it was only with the incursion of beliefs from the eastern empire that it developed into a widespread fascination and gave birth to secret societies whose members underwent special ceremonies that were reckoned to imbue them with knowledge of certain deities that was not accessible to all, and which in turn offered them certain advantages and benefits over others who had not been so initiated. Initiation could be an

expensive business, though those involved always expected that the benefits it conferred would more than compensate for whatever the cost might be. Since these groups were by definition secret societies, our specific knowledge of them is limited. Many were of only local significance and are not well documented at all, though some were more widespread and attracted an international following. A common theme in most mystery religions was concerned with the annual cycle of the seasons and with issues of fertility and power, celebrated through mythologies and rituals that reflected the new life of spring following the barrenness of winter, all of it symbolized by the death and rebirth of the divinities (both male and female) of fertility.

The traditional religions of Mesopotamia and Palestine had generally celebrated this cyclical worldview in annual festivals in which priests and priestesses would act out the role of the deities, often involving ceremonies with strong sexual overtones, and in the Hellenistic mysteries such rituals became mystical experiences for the individual worshipper. Their original mythology was transferred from the ongoing life of nature and projected onto the experience of individual people, who themselves spoke of undergoing the death and rebirth that had been so important to the prosperity of the ancient farmer. The sort of ceremonial initiations involved in this took many different forms, ranging from the orgasmic ecstasies of Dionysus (the Roman Bacchus) whose rituals became a byword for sexual promiscuity, to the more gruesome taurobolium involved in the cult of Attis that is depicted in many inscriptions and frescos, albeit mostly dating from the second century AD rather than the first. One of few written accounts of this ceremony (Prudentius, Peristephanon X.1011–50) describes how the initiate would be placed in a pit in the ground, then covered over with a wicker framework on which a bull (symbol of life and virility) would be slaughtered so that its blood would run down and soak the initiate. As the initiate emerged those who were gathered around to witness it would genuflect before him in acknowledgment of that fact that he had now been elevated to a higher plane of existence through imbibing the life and energy of the bull.

Mithraism was another mystery religion in which the sacrifice of a bull played a major role, though not as a regular part of the initiation rites. This came to be one of the best-known mystery religions and was particularly popular among

officers in the Roman army from the late first century onwards. For a long time it was believed to have roots in Zoroastrianism (an ancient Persian religion), in which Mithras appears as a divinity of trust and faithfulness on the side of Ahura Mazda, the god of light, in the cosmic battle against the forces of darkness that are personified as Ahriman. But others connect it with Greco-Roman astrological speculations about the planets. Mithraic initiation had seven degrees, each one conferring increasingly significant rights on the initiate. The meaning attached to these stages can only be deduced from frescoes depicting them, but it would appear that they variously involved trial by water and fire, including perhaps some ritual branding, along with beatings with whips and other actions – all of them conducted while the initiate was naked and blindfolded. Unlike most other mystery religions, women were not allowed to participate, and its initiates were committed to upholding a strong moral code of behaviour.

These mysteries – and many others – offered hope and security to their initiates, in both personal and social terms. Individuals gained a sense of personal meaning and purpose in life. They also became members of a distinctive group who shared the same secret experiences and often operated as a mutual aid society in times of difficulty or hardship. In the centuries following the New Testament period some early Christian writers compared the claims of these mystery religions to their own faith, usually denouncing them as demonic imitations of Christian rituals such as baptism. While one can well understand the missional impetus that might have provoked such comparisons, it is doubtful whether such apologists had a very clear understanding of the various cults, not least because they were all secret and therefore by definition not easily accessible to outsiders. In the process of doing this, they created the impression that there must have been some connection between the mysteries and the early church, which in the late nineteenth century led to a good deal of speculation about the possibility that there might have been some more integrated relationship. It is an easy matter to identify superficial resemblances between the mystery religions and the Christian faith. Both were heavily influenced by religious traditions emanating in the eastern empire, both offered ‘salvation’ to their followers, both used initiation rites (Christian baptism) and sacramental meals (the Christian communion), and the term ‘lord’ could be used to refer to a divine saviour. The two often became intertwined as converts from the mysteries entered the church and used the familiar categories of their mystery beliefs as a vehicle for articulating their new faith. It was probably this tendency that was the

cause of much of the trouble in the church at Corinth, about which Paul wrote in his letters to the Corinthians, and there may also be traces of something similar in the background to Colossians. Scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proposed that Paul changed the simple ethical teaching of Jesus into a kind of mystery religion, and though the idea still surfaces occasionally in popular opinions about Paul it is given no credence within the academic community. The evidence is very disjointed, simply because the mystery religions themselves were many, and apart from the importance given to secrets and initiations there is nothing else about them that suggests they were all a part of some coherent religious movement. In addition, some of the alleged points of contact could have more than one possible explanation. For instance, when the title ‘lord’ was applied to Jesus it certainly did not come from mystery religions, but from Judaism. The Christian confession of faith, ‘may our Lord come’ (recorded in 1 Corinthians 16:22 in its Aramaic form, Maranatha), shows that the very earliest church in Jerusalem, the only one to speak Aramaic, must have given Jesus that title long before Christianity expanded in the heart of the empire.

No doubt Paul and others knew of the mystery religions and their resemblances to Christianity. It is possible that Paul, who was ready to be ‘all things to all people’ (1 Corinthians 9:22, NRSV), sometimes deliberately used their language. But as with Stoicism, it is more likely that he used it unconsciously, with neither detailed knowledge of the mystery religions nor any specific reference to any of their ceremonies.

Gnosticism

While Gnosticism has some characteristics in common with the mystery religions, it is sufficiently distinctive to be considered as a different movement. The word itself comes from the Greek noun gnōsis, meaning ‘knowledge’, and like any label that may be attached to popular spirituality in the Hellenistic world it requires further definition before it can be very useful. Just as the term ‘mystery religion’ covers a variety of groups, all of which had their own attributes, so with the notion of ‘Gnosticism’, which is more of a generic term covering a sort of spiritual environment than an accurate description of any particular belief system or way of life. Very few groups called themselves Gnostics, and the widespread use of the term originates from the writings of early Christians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria, all of whom wrote extensive works condemning the teaching of people whom they identified in this way. Even they, however, acknowledged the difficulty of pinning down exactly what and who they were writing about, and Irenaeus admitted that ‘there are as many systems of redemption as there are teachers of these mystical doctrines’ (Against Heresies 1.21.1). Since these church leaders only wrote about the Gnostics in order to condemn them, their opinions as to what constituted Gnostic belief were always couched in terms drawn from Christian theology rather than reflecting first-hand knowledge – which, of course, would have been hard for outsiders to come by, because like the mystery religions Gnosticism was largely a secret business and therefore not easily accessible to anyone who was not an initiate. However, many Gnostic writings have come to light, and they tend to confirm at least the broad outlines of Gnosticism as depicted by its Christian opponents.

The foundational worldview of Gnosticism involved a radical demarcation between this world and some other world of the spirit, with the material world being regarded as evil and physical existence forming a significant hindrance to a person achieving their true destiny in the world of spirit. In this respect Gnosticism could be described as a form of radical Platonism, or the classic philosophical tradition more broadly, which made a similar differentiation between the body and the soul, between physical activities shared with animals

and the rational reflection that seemed to make human beings unique. Matter, on this view, was so alien to the world of the spirit that it was regarded as the creation of an inferior deity, referred to as the Demiurge and sometimes identified with the God of the Hebrew Bible. The Demiurge therefore had a vested interest in preventing people from escaping from this world to discover their true home in the abode of the Supreme God, and was assisted in this enterprise by the Archons, who barred the path of individual souls as they tried to escape on death. Some individuals had no chance of ever escaping material existence, because they had no divine spark at all, though some did and these were the ones who could benefit from the gnōsis that could equip them with the insight necessary to understand their imprisonment and open to them the possibility of escape. A Gnostic writing puts it like this:

… it is not only the washing that is liberty, but the knowledge [gnōsis] of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is, and what rebirth.

Excerpta Theodotia 78.2

In some Gnostic systems, this enlightenment is the work of a divine redeemer who descends from the spirit world and alerts those with the divine spark to their true status, which then enables them to escape on death from the material world to the spiritual. When Gnostics spoke of ‘knowledge’ they did not have in mind an intellectual knowing of religious dogmas, or indeed of science. They referred to a mystical experience, a direct ‘knowing’ of the supreme God. The Gnostics themselves evolved elaborate mythological stories to explain all this, many of them involving characters from the Old Testament such as Adam or Cain, or individuals like Simon the magician, mentioned in the New Testament book of Acts. But behind this complicated mythology was a personal existential dilemma related to the nature of human identity and purpose – features that enabled the twentieth-century Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung to base much of his theory of human nature on an understanding of ancient Gnostic texts, one of which (the Jung Codex) is named after him.

In relation to personal behaviour this kind of belief could lead to two quite opposite extremes. Some argued that their aim of complete liberation from the grasp of the material world could best be achieved by a rigorous asceticism that would effectively deny the reality of their bodily existence. But there were others who believed that by virtue of their mystical ‘knowledge’ they had already been released from all material ties, and therefore what they did in their present life was totally irrelevant to their ultimate spiritual destiny. They saw it as their duty to spoil everything connected with life in the material world, including especially its standards of morality and what were regarded as conventional forms of behaviour. They might therefore promote intentional anarchic and undisciplined behaviour as part of their spiritual quest.

It is not difficult to trace connections between this outlook and various groups who are mentioned in the New Testament. Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth often seem to be criticizing views that would certainly be congenial to later Gnostics, while Colossians, 1 John, and Revelation 1–3 also seem to be concerned with debates about people who were seeking to understand Christian faith in similar terms. At the same time, there is a good deal of debate about the origins of Gnosticism and it is far from certain that it existed in any structured form in the early first century AD. There is positive evidence of its existence in the second and third centuries, from Gnostic documents as well as from the writings of those church leaders who wrote to denounce it. These later groups can hardly have constructed their systems out of nothing, though, and no doubt they adopted ideas that had been in circulation for a long time. The one thing that can be said for certain about Gnosticism is that it was highly eclectic and intensely syncretistic. It combined bits and pieces of spiritual wisdom from many sources and incorporated them into something like a coherent picture within its own dualistic worldview. It is therefore perfectly possible to trace connections with Judaism, with classical philosophical thought, and with traditional Persian religions as well as with Christianity, while acknowledging that there was little inner consistency about the ideas taken from these sources, and that what coherence they had was derived from the fact that Gnostics found them all to be serviceable in their own search for the spiritual meaning of life.

Judaism

It may come as a surprise to see Judaism listed as a popular spiritual pathway in the Hellenistic world, but it was readily accessible through the substantial numbers of Jews who lived in all the major cities of the Roman empire and continued to maintain their traditional beliefs and lifestyle. Though Jewish people always looked to Jerusalem as their true homeland, in New Testament times there were more Jews living in a city like Alexandria in Egypt than in Jerusalem itself, and overall there were significantly greater numbers living in the major urban centres of the Roman empire than there were in the whole of Palestine. Josephus quotes the Latin author Strabo's comment that the Jewish nation 'has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation, and in which it has not made its power felt' (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 14.7.2).

Every Jewish person aspired to take part in the worship of the temple in Jerusalem, but for most of the time the synagogue was the focus not only of worship, but of community life. By the time the first Christian missionaries were beginning to travel with their message about Jesus, there was an extensive network of Jewish synagogues throughout the Roman empire. While activities in the Jerusalem temple were carefully controlled, the synagogues had more scope to develop their own ways of being as people worked out for themselves how best to adapt their ancestral faith to the demands and opportunities of different localities around the Mediterranean. Even within the same city, different synagogues might reach different conclusions. In Rome, for example, some Jews were quite happy to go along with many aspects of Hellenistic culture, even giving their children Latin or Greek names and adopting the art forms of Roman civilization, while others in the same city deplored what they saw as a dilution and betrayal of their ancestral faith, and stuck rigidly to a more traditional understanding of the requirements of the Hebrew Bible.

Some Jews engaged with the study of Greek philosophy. The most famous of them was Philo, who was born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and was an

older contemporary of Jesus (c.20 BC–50 AD). He was a member of an influential Jewish family, and some of his relatives were active in the politics of Egypt and other places. But Philo was most interested in exploring the thinking of Greek writers, especially the Stoics. He found many of their ideas congenial, and set out to show how the Hebrew scriptures and Greek philosophy were really saying the same things in their own distinctive ways. In order to demonstrate this, he had to regard the traditional stories of his people as an allegorical or symbolic presentation of the rather more abstract ideas expounded by the philosophers. Orthodox Jews elsewhere in the empire would certainly have regarded Philo as a traitor to his religion, but he saw himself as a faithful interpreter who was proud of his ancestral traditions, and had no doubt that what he was doing was both worthwhile and necessary. There was, however, one thing on which all the synagogues of the Roman world were united, and this was their use of the Greek language. As one generation succeeded another it was not long before the vast majority of Jews in the Mediterranean world could speak no other language, and so it became important that the ancient Jewish scriptures, originally written in Hebrew, should be translated into the language that most Jews now spoke and understood best. The actual origins of their Greek Bible (the Septuagint, often abbreviated as LXX) are shrouded in obscurity, though by the first century AD it was widely available and became the Bible of the first Christians.

These Jewish communities were always concerned to maintain a distinction between themselves and their Gentile neighbours, but they were not really exclusive groups and were usually more than happy for others to join them. Many Greeks and Romans were attracted by what they saw. Moreover, from the perspective of city-dwellers in the western empire, Judaism was essentially an eastern religion and held all the attractions of mystery and intrigue that such an origin implied. But unlike the esoteric mystery cults, Judaism was readily accessible to outsiders. They could see its practical outworking in the everyday life of their Jewish friends, because it found expression in the ordinary life of the home. The way that it focused on practical morality meant it shared some of the best aspects of the philosophical schools, while also being rooted in ancient scriptural texts that, being written originally in Hebrew, had an aura of mystery about them – though the fact that they were readily available in Greek meant that anyone in the empire could read them and reflect on their message in their own time before committing themselves to connecting with the Jewish faith

community.

Jewish teachers were not slow to exploit this openness to Judaism among those who were not ethnically Jewish people. Even in the time of Jesus, the persistence and enthusiasm of Jewish rabbis in sharing their faith with others, crossing land and sea to do so, was legendary (Matthew 23:15). Moreover, the Jewish emphasis on rigorous standards of personal and social morality found a warm reception among many Greeks and Romans, who were dissatisfied with the permissiveness and apparent lack of ethical direction of their own culture. A minority chose to take upon themselves all the demands of the Hebrew scriptures and become full members of the community (‘proselytes’), while many more adopted the practical lifestyle and were just as welcome but with a lesser status as ‘God-fearers’. These converts to Judaism played a significant role in the life of the early Christian church. One of the first non-Jewish Christians mentioned in the New Testament – Cornelius, a Roman centurion – was a ‘God-fearer’ (Acts 10:1–48), and as the first Christian missionaries took their message into the wider Roman empire they often found an enthusiastic response among such people. Indeed, Paul felt it was so important to share the message with these people that he made it a specific policy always to go first to the Jewish community in every town he visited.

Christianity

This was the world into which the first Christians brought their message about Jesus. It was a world that had been cut adrift from its roots, in search of a new self-understanding with many competing faiths and ideologies claiming to have the answers to the big questions about life and its meaning. The extraordinary success of the Christian faith in this context can be explained in many ways. One of the key factors is simply that the Christian message addressed the concerns of people in that culture at that point in time. As the original followers of Jesus moved from their homeland on the fringes of the empire into the large urban centres of the western Mediterranean, they met people at their point of need. Not only were they able to engage with the questions that people were asking on an intellectual level, but in addition – and, if anything, even more significantly – the groups of Christian believers which they established throughout the empire demonstrated in a practical way the sense of purpose and meaning in life for which so many were searching.

The claim that Jesus was the fulfilment of the highest ideals of Judaism gave his followers a head start. Greeks and Romans – and expatriate Jews – naturally wanted to know what the Christians had to say, and because the Hebrew Bible had already been translated into Greek, the Christians had no difficulty at all in explaining their message in specific terms. In addition, Christianity had a certain curiosity value to the western city-dwellers, as one of the many religions that were moving in from the eastern empire. Palestine was widely regarded as the very edge of the civilized land, and anything coming from that quarter would always be given a hearing by those who were disillusioned with their own religious heritage.

These early Christians could also appeal to individuals who were attracted to Gnosticism and the mystery religions. The whole thrust of Jesus' teaching was quite different from those world-denying systems of thought. But for that very reason it gave a more convincing explanation of life as it is in this world, rather than encouraging people to opt out and dream of the possibilities of life in some

other world. With its emphasis on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christian message was firmly based on events that had taken place in the same world in which people lived every day. It did not require believers to distance themselves from the here and now, but offered them transformational possibilities within their existing environment by insisting that this is the context in which God is active and can be known in life-giving ways. Christians also affirmed that a good life could not be achieved by human ingenuity, and without denigrating the value of rationality (as the mystery religions tended to do), they claimed that reason was not capable by itself of discerning the meaning of life. True satisfaction could only be found, they argued, through a close personal relationship with God. Through the work of God's Spirit, this shared some of the characteristics of the mystical experiences so popular at the time, but by virtue of being rooted in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth it was always grounded in the embodied realities of life in this world and was open to rational scrutiny. In addition, Christianity was not only concerned with individual self-fulfilment, but invited people into a new set of relationships with one another that could change the world and offered a meaningful context for a corporate as well as an individual spirituality.

It is not difficult to see why and how the early Christians were able to fill the spiritual vacuum of the Hellenistic world so successfully. But the story of their faith is much more complex than just a haphazard coincidence of social factors in the Roman empire. Indeed, though this predominantly urban world was the context in which the New Testament came to birth, the story began in a very different social environment, and to understand it more fully it is necessary to delve into the sometimes convoluted world of Jewish history and religion.

CHAPTER 2

PALESTINE AND ITS PEOPLE

When Alexander the Great conquered the ancient world, most nations went along with his policy of Hellenization. In many instances they accepted it only grudgingly, and quite often Hellenism had only a cosmetic impact on traditional ways of being. National institutions would be adjusted to conform to the Greek style, and the upper classes in particular found it advantageous to adopt Greek habits, while the life of ordinary people and the overall feel of the culture could remain virtually unchanged from previous generations. Most conquered nations would have preferred to retain full control over their own destiny, but they knew well enough that the sensible thing was to accept the political reality and co-operate with the superpowers of the day. In any case, even if Alexander's policy of cultural uniformity was rather more thoroughgoing than the demands of most previous empires, it was not an entirely new concept. For centuries, subject nations had demonstrated their subordination by accepting the culture of their conquerors and it was taken for granted that this would include at least a token allegiance to the religions of their overlords. Modern states change the image on their postage stamps or currency when a new regime seizes power: in the ancient world, they changed the statues and altars in their temples. It can have come as no surprise to discover that under Greek rulers, subject nations would be expected to find a place for images of the Greek deities. Most were willing to do so, but not the Jews of Palestine. For them, practical politics and deeply held religious convictions could never be reconciled quite so easily. For 500 years or more, their ancestral faith had insisted that there was just one God, to be worshipped without visual representations and according to carefully prescribed regulations. Other nations might declare their allegiance to Zeus by placing his statue alongside their own gods and goddesses, and expanding their existing rituals so as to include him, but Israel could never do that without denying some of the most central aspects of the faith.

Alexander himself was far too shrewd an operator to allow such misgivings to become a major concern, and it was only long after his death that they became a real issue, under the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BC), a member of the Seleucid dynasty which had seized control of Palestine just over twenty years previously. His predecessors had allowed the indigenous rulers in Jerusalem a good deal of local independence, exercised through the high priesthood. The high priesthood itself became embroiled in an internal power struggle at exactly the same time as Antiochus suffered a humiliating defeat in Egypt at the hands of the Romans (168 BC). Determined to reassert his authority by whatever means he could, Antiochus saw the Jews as an easy target and marched on Jerusalem determined to show who was in charge. He knew enough to realize that the factional arguments about the priesthood were not purely political, but involved differences of opinion among the Jews themselves about their own religion – something that he neither understood nor cared for, but if it was causing trouble then he was ready to do whatever was necessary to reduce its power.

Antiochus initiated a thoroughgoing policy of enforced Hellenization in which everything that was most distinctive about Jewish life was banned, including circumcision, keeping the sabbath day, and reading the traditional scriptures. Even worse, Antiochus demanded that the temple in Jerusalem be dedicated to the Greek god Zeus and insisted that it should be accessible to the entire population, including people who were not themselves Jewish believers. Cultural integration had always been desirable to the Greek rulers of Palestine, but whereas his predecessors had taken a more pragmatic view, Antiochus believed it was now essential to stamp out Jewish distinctiveness in order to ensure his own political survival. Whether they liked it or not, and regardless of the consequences, everyone in the land would be united in a thoroughly Greek way of life. Antiochus soon discovered that he had seriously underestimated the strength of Jewish religious feeling. Antiochus’s efforts to enforce this new regime only increased the determination of the Jewish people to fight back and it was not long before an armed resistance movement was established by

Mattathias, a priest from the village of Modein, along with his five sons (the ‘Maccabees’). Their tactics of guerrilla warfare were so successful that it took only three years for Antiochus’s troops to be defeated and for his policies to be reversed.

Jews and Romans

All that took place nearly 200 years before the time of Jesus. In the intervening period, the Greeks had been replaced by the Romans as the dominant superpower but the Jews of Palestine never lost their firm determination to resist religious compromise and, if possible, to re-assert their right to political self-determination. This fiercely independent posture was inspired by their belief that they had been specially chosen by God to rule the world under the leadership of a promised deliverer, the 'Messiah'. Ancient stories from the days of David and Solomon, almost a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, depicted their forebears as a significant political power, and their more recent successes against Antiochus had shown that they were still a force to be reckoned with. But it was obvious to most Jews living in Palestine in Jesus' day that something of almost supernatural proportions would be required if they were ever to be released from the iron grip of Rome. At the same time, not all Jews wanted to be freed from Roman rule. Some sections of society found it was advantageous to be friendly with the Romans, and even among those who saw freedom as an ideal, not many were prepared to take practical action to secure it. The Romans had an unenviable task in Palestine right from the start. As the main eastern frontier of their entire empire, its continuing security was essential, though they were pragmatists and were prepared to make allowances for Jewish scruples. When they appointed Herod the Great as ruler of Judea in 37 BC, they hoped he would be acceptable to Jewish public opinion, for as well as being a person whom the Romans felt they could trust he was also half Jewish, a fact which they assumed would commend him to the Jewish people and diminish their resistance to foreign rule.

Herod the Great

Herod's father was Antipater, and according to one source he was supposedly a direct descendant of those inhabitants of Judah who had been taken into exile by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC, though it seems more likely that he was an Idumaean, a native of Edom which was between the southern end of the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. Edomite ancestry was traditionally traced back to Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, who was regarded as the ancestor of the Jewish nation. In more recent times, the Idumeans had been forced to adopt the Jewish faith which meant that Antipater and his son Herod could claim to be true Jewish believers despite their questionable ethnic connections to the Jewish nation. Herod's mother Cypros was a Nabatean, a mobile trading people whose sphere of operations extended from Palestine south and east towards the northern part of the Arabian peninsula. It was this ethnic mix that enabled Herod to rise so easily to a position of prominence and power as a ruler of Palestine. He was regarded as sufficiently Jewish as to be able to present himself as a genuinely native ruler, while at the same time he was not so thoroughly Jewish as to align himself with those religiously fanatical believers who would continue to press for the re-establishment of an independent Jewish state in opposition to all external rule.

By the time of Herod's birth, probably in 73 BC, the Romans had seized power throughout the Mediterranean lands, and any local ruler who wished to prosper could only do so with their support. Antipater was an influential state official under the Hasmonean kings who succeeded the Maccabees, and when the Roman general Pompey the Great conquered Judea in 63 BC, he promptly transferred his allegiance to Rome. When internal struggles within the Roman hierarchy led to Pompey's defeat at the hands of Julius Caesar, Antipater had no hesitation in switching his loyalties again, as a consequence of which he was appointed in 47 BC to be the chief Roman representative in Judea, a position that carried with it the right to raise his own local taxes. Not long after this, Julius Caesar himself was assassinated in 44 BC and Antipater showed his political astuteness by transferring his loyalties once more. But by now, those conservative Jews who had never wanted anything to do with the Romans had

lost patience with his policies of appeasement and within a year of Caesar's death Antipater had followed him, assassinated at the hands of a poisoner.

Despite this apparent setback, Antipater had laid solid foundations for the continuing success of his family by appointing his sons Phasael and Herod to be the governors of Jerusalem and Galilee respectively, and this paved the way for Herod's rise to power. Following the example of many ancient kings before him, Herod consolidated his position through marriage to Mariamne. She was a member of the Hasmonean family, which secured support from significant elements of the Jewish population while not alienating the Romans, and it was only a matter of time before Herod was acknowledged as king of Judea. Palestine was on the eastern extremity of the empire, and it made sense for the Romans to recruit a local ruler rather than commit large numbers of their own troops to a land that had little to offer them. The events of the Maccabean period had shown that there would always be significant resistance to being ruled by people who were regarded as infidels and unbelievers, so what better way to maintain control at minimal cost than by supporting someone like Herod, who was native to the region but also sympathetic to Rome? He was the ideal candidate: his mixed ethnicity meant that the Romans could regard him as a Gentile (or certainly not fully Jewish), while he had married a Jewish wife, and could claim to be a believer himself, which gave him a strong enough relationship to the Jewish faith and people for everyone except religious extremists to regard him as one of their own. It was an arrangement that lasted for more than thirty years and Herod turned out to be everything that the Romans could have hoped for.

Herod combined diplomatic sophistication with personal instability and a psychopathic personality. Though there is no record of it outside the New Testament, the story of how he murdered the children of Bethlehem after Jesus was born (Matthew 2:16) is quite consistent with all that is known of his behaviour. As governor of Galilee early in his life he had suppressed a revolt led by Hezekiah the Galilean in a particularly brutal fashion, and even as he lay on his deathbed he instructed his sister Salome and her husband to gather leaders from every town in Judea and have them killed, so that instead of rejoicing at his own death (as he expected they would), his subjects would be forced to mourn

the loss of these others. He never thought twice about killing even his own family. Mariamne was executed on his orders, even though her death then plunged him into a period of deep depression. He was also implicated in the murder of two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, while only five days before his death in 4 BC he ordered the execution of Antipater, another son who had been expected to succeed him. He also orchestrated the violent deaths of countless members of his wider network of family and colleagues, many of whom were subjected to vicious torture in the process. The emperor Augustus is reported to have said that it was ‘better to be Herod’s pig than his son’ (pigs being religiously unclean beasts in Judaism and so not routinely killed for food).

Herod was clearly an unhappy and unstable man. The mixed ancestry that made him so acceptable to the Romans seems to have stunted his personal development, as he struggled with the reality that he was ‘half-Jewish’ and ‘half-Idumaean/Nabatean’. He certainly had an inferiority complex about his personal appearance, and the historian Josephus (37–100 AD) mentions his frustration that his brother-in-law and sons were all taller and better looking than him. He was suspicious of just about everyone apart from his sister, and was convinced that others were constantly plotting to get rid of him. He also suffered from many significant health issues (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 17.6.5). On his death he was buried at Herodium, a fortress some five miles to the south-east of Bethlehem in the Judean desert and one of his favourite residences. In spite of his personal weaknesses, as a politician Herod deserved to be called ‘the Great’. The peace and order that he maintained throughout his territory was a stark contrast to the upheavals that marked the centuries immediately preceding his reign. He was also responsible for a massive construction programme that marks him out as one of the greatest builders anywhere in the whole of history. Three of his projects in Jerusalem rank among the largest civil engineering works in the ancient world: the palace known as the Lower Herodium, the plaza of the Temple Mount, and the portico of the Temple Mount itself. In addition to those he built magnificent palaces in Jericho and Caesarea, along with royal fortresses at Masada, Herodium, and Machaerus – while the harbour of Caesarea was widely regarded as one of the most sophisticated constructions anywhere in the ancient world. As well as the temple in Jerusalem (which was not completed until long after his own death), other religious projects included the reconstruction of the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, while outside his own territory he financed prestigious projects throughout the eastern part of the

Roman world.

Three Herods

When Herod the Great died in 4 BC the Romans divided his kingdom among his three remaining sons: Archelaus, Antipas, and their half-brother Philip. At Roman insistence all three of them had been sent to Rome for their education. They were not captives, but the fact that they were there probably helped to secure their father's continued loyalty, and given his pathological tendencies may well have ensured their own survival so that when he died they would be able to be appointed as rulers of his kingdom.

Division of the kingdom on the death of Herod the Great.

Archelaus

Archelaus was Herod's own choice to become king in the most significant part of his territory that included Jerusalem, though Augustus refused to allow him to be called 'king' and he was designated as 'ethnarch' (meaning 'national leader') of Samaria, Judaea, and Idumea. Archelaus had difficulties right from the start with Judas and Matthias, two religious leaders who had taken advantage of the hiatus caused by his father's final illness to remove the statue of a golden eagle from the temple, believing that it infringed the prohibition of the making of 'graven images' in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4). The culprits were punished by being burned alive, and as a result Archelaus found himself with a riot on his hands, which led to some 3,000 people being killed during the celebration of the Feast of Passover. Misjudging the mood of the people, Archelaus left the country and travelled to Rome to have his position confirmed by the emperor and in his absence fresh riots broke out, this time orchestrated by individuals who were claiming messianic status for themselves. Archelaus's own forces were unable to restore order and the Roman governor of Syria, Publius Quinctilius Varus, was forced to intervene. He failed to catch all the ringleaders, but that did not stop him ordering the crucifixion of some 2,000 people. When Archelaus came back he turned out to be such an inept ruler that the people themselves asked the Romans to remove him. His reign lasted for only ten years, and in AD 6 – and after yet more political unrest – Judea became a third-grade province of the Roman empire under an officer of the equestrian rank, who was himself under the direct command of the Roman governor of Syria. Archelaus was exiled in Gaul, and little more is known about the rest of his life.

Antipas

Antipas was another of Herod the Great's sons and in accordance with his father's wishes and with the approval of Augustus he inherited the northern part of Palestine (Galilee and Perea) and ruled as 'tetrarch' (a word that literally means 'ruler of one quarter', but which could be used more generally to describe

a minor ruler under the Romans). This included the village of Nazareth where Jesus grew up and much of Jesus' ministry took place in territory that was under Antipas's jurisdiction. Like his father, he was a devious man who enjoyed the good life and was determined to leave a lasting legacy in the form of massive construction projects, including Tiberias and Sepphoris, which have already been described in the Introduction.

Like his father, Antipas projected an image of himself as a faithful Jewish believer by observing the religious festivals in Jerusalem, but his sincerity was continually questioned and he features in the New Testament as a slippery customer who could not be trusted. This is the same Herod Antipas who ordered John the Baptist's execution after John criticized his multiple sexual relationships (Mark 6:17–29). Antipas's first wife was Phasaelis, the daughter of an Arabian ruler named Aretas IV, but he subsequently divorced her and married Herodias, a woman who had previously been the wife of his own half-brother. The relationships of the Herod family were never straightforward and as well as being the former wife of his brother, Herodias was also the daughter of another half-brother (Aristobulus), so she was also Antipas's niece. The story of how Antipas secured the death of John the Baptist also reveals something of his character, as he offered his daughter Salome any gift she wanted as a reward for dancing in public before his guests – and she asked for John's head to be served up on a dinner plate! The gruesome nature of her request raised questions that might offend our sensibilities today, but in the context of first-century Judaism the fact that her father asked her to dance in front of other men would have been just as objectionable. It is little wonder that Jesus compared him to a 'fox' (like a pig, regarded as another unclean animal), and his later involvement in the trials of Jesus himself demonstrates the same traits of deviousness and dishonesty (Luke 23:6–12).

As a ruler, Antipas did not have the same flair as his father. He engaged in a fruitless and unpopular war with his former father-in-law Aretas, during which the Arabian ruler enjoyed considerable success – something that according to Josephus many people regarded as divine punishment for Antipas's marital unfaithfulness. His wife Herodias shared some of the same traits, and when Antipas's half-brother Philip died she plotted to acquire his territory for Antipas,

a move that was not approved in Rome and led to Antipas being removed and sent to live in exile in Gaul.

Philip

Philip was the third of Herod the Great's sons to inherit territory on his father's death, becoming 'tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis' (territory in the south-west of what is now Syria). The population of this region was predominantly Gentile and that, along with the relative remoteness of his territory from Jerusalem, ensured that he would never be too closely scrutinized by the religious authorities. The extent to which Philip broke with Jewish convention can be seen in the designs on his coins which typically included not only the head of the Roman emperor but often also a design inspired by that of the pagan temples in the wider empire – both things that could easily have caused a riot in Judea. Many of his people represented the old traditions of semi-nomadic lifestyles that can be traced right back to ancient Mesopotamia, and Philip readily adopted that way of life himself when dealing with the mobile population of the region. His territory also embraced city-dwellers, some of them living in settlements that had been established by Herod the Great, though Philip himself also extended what had originally been smaller villages and these became home to inhabitants of predominantly Greek and Roman origin. Like his brothers, he depended on the goodwill of the Romans and courted the favour of the emperor: he renamed the extended village of Paneas (at the foot of Mount Hermon) Caesarea Philippi in honour of the emperor and renamed Bethsaida Julias after the emperor's daughter Julia.

Of all the sons of Herod the Great, Philip was the only one who proved to be a balanced and humane ruler and he died peacefully at Julias in AD 34. Even Josephus had nothing but praise for his accomplishments, describing him as

a person of moderation and quietness in the conduct of his life and government; he constantly lived in that country which was subject to him; he used to make his

progress with a few chosen friends; his tribunal also, on which he sat in judgment, followed him in his progress; and when any one met him who wanted his assistance, he made no delay, but had his tribunal set down immediately…

Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 18.4.6

Philip left no sons who could succeed him and his territory was incorporated briefly into the Roman province of Syria. But that was a short-lived arrangement and on the death of Tiberius in AD 37, his successor Caligula reorganized it into an independent territory. Philip's nephew Agrippa was appointed as its ruler, with the royal title of 'king' – the first member of the Herod family to be given that distinction since the death of his grandfather Herod the Great some forty years previously.

Two more Herods

Agrippa's father Aristobulus was one of Herod the Great's sons, though he had been executed on his father's orders in 7 BC. Agrippa was only three at the time and he was sent off to Rome to be educated where he made quite a life for himself, becoming close friends with two Romans who would later become emperors: Caligula and Claudius. He may well have stayed there with his wife Cyprus and their five children had he not become embroiled in some underhand financial dealings which necessitated his departure. Even then he displayed the same survival instincts as his grandfather had, securing official positions for himself in Idumea, followed by Galilee, and eventually Alexandria in Egypt before his wife managed to make amends for his financial misdeeds which enabled them to return to Rome. Once there he ended up in prison for his part in a plot to oust the emperor Tiberius and replace him with Caligula, though he was released when Caligula became emperor on Tiberius's death. In return for his loyalty this old school friend sent Agrippa back to Philip's territory as king; within a short time he was also granted territory previously ruled by Antipas in Galilee and Perea.

Josephus and the New Testament both make it clear that Agrippa was no friend of the Christians. More than that, they both testify to his own aspirations to divinity and connect this to his untimely and gruesome death in AD 44 (Josephus, Antiquities 19.343–50; Acts 12:19b–23), which the New Testament regards as God's judgment for the way he was persecuting the Christians. James, the son of Zebedee, one of the original disciples of Jesus, was beheaded on Agrippa's orders but he was not the only one to suffer, and Peter was also thrown into prison during his reign. Herod Agrippa had a son, Julius Marcus Agrippa, who was probably a teenager when his father died and after a brief interlude of direct Roman rule he inherited much of his father's territory, though excluding Judea which again came under the control of Roman governors. He is usually called Herod Agrippa II to distinguish him from his father, Herod Agrippa I. Like others before him, he liked to be seen as a faithful adherent of the Jewish faith while privately enjoying a thoroughly Hellenistic lifestyle. This was the

Agrippa whom Paul met in Caesarea in the year AD 58, and who declared himself to be almost persuaded to become a Christian (Acts 26:28–32).

The latter years of Agrippa II's reign were characterized by growing civil unrest and political tensions, partly sparked off by the eventual completion in AD 63 of the massive rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple that had been initiated by Herod the Great. National pride at this achievement was tempered by concern at the numbers of workers who found themselves unemployed as a consequence, and when that uncertainty was combined with high levels of taxation and shortages of basic foodstuffs political instability was inevitable. Agrippa was unable to control the situation and the entire country descended into what was effectively a civil war during which Agrippa went to Rome to ingratiate himself with Galba, who became emperor for a short time on the death of Nero. By the time Agrippa returned to Judea early in AD 70 he was just in time to witness the final demise of his kingdom. Ever the artful politician, he returned to Rome and persuaded the new emperor Vespasian to reward his loyalty with new territories that were mostly located in Syria, where he appears to have lived in relative tranquility until almost the end of the first century.

Religious loyalties

Josephus was a commander of forces opposing the Roman invasion in AD 66, but switched sides and spent the remainder of his life writing up the history of his people to commend their traditions and faith to a wider audience throughout the empire. In describing the religious views of Jews in Palestine at the time of Jesus, he identified three main opinions: Pharisees, Sadducees, and a ‘third sect with a reputation for being more disciplined’ – the Essenes (Jewish Wars 2.8.2). He also mentions a fourth group, Zealots, but unlike the others they were not described as a ‘philosophical sect’, so presumably they formed some looser sort of association (Jewish Wars 4.3.9). The origins of all these groups can be traced to the years following the Maccabean Revolt, though gauging their numerical strength is largely a matter of guesswork, and alongside these organized groups there was also a widely held popular spirituality represented by the millennial speculations of the apocalyptists.

Traditionalists: the Sadducees

Though the Sadducees are often mentioned alongside the Pharisees the two groups were not related but were quite separate and actually held opposite opinions on almost everything. Our knowledge of the Pharisees is mostly derived from their admirers (Josephus and the later rabbis), but everything we know of the Sadducees comes from their opponents (Josephus and Christians) which means that our information is limited to what they did not believe (but which others did) rather than with any positive statement of their worldview. We know that they played down the importance of the prophets and the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible by allowing ultimate authority only to the Law given by Moses in its first five books (the Pentateuch, or Torah), which meant that some beliefs that were widely held in the first century were rejected by the Sadducees because they were not explicitly contained in the Torah. This included matters such as belief in a future life, resurrection, and a final judgment, along with the notion that history had a purpose and ultimate significance that was guided by God.

The name ‘Sadducee’ seems to mean ‘son of Zadok’, although the Sadducees were certainly not direct descendants of the priest Zadok who is mentioned in 2 Samuel 15:24–29. Other meanings for the name are also possible: either from the Hebrew word sadiq, meaning ‘moral integrity’ or ‘righteousness’; or from the Greek word syndicoi, which could mean ‘members of the council’. It is certainly true that the Jewish council of seventy (the Sanhedrin) had many Sadducees among its members, though since the remaining members were Pharisees, it is doubtful if this would be the origin of their distinctive name. Not all priests were Sadducees, though the leaders of the temple certainly were, together with the most well-to-do classes of Jewish society. They held conservative views on most things and resisted change, whether religious or cultural. In particular, they wanted to keep the Romans happy, and despite being extreme conservatives in religious terms they seem to have adopted a pragmatic attitude towards Roman rule, which gave them more access to the levers of political power than almost any other group of Jewish people. Even if they believed in the coming of a Messiah (which is by no means certain) they would

never have supported the political protests that often accompanied such a belief. Because the temple was their power base, and its life was rigorously regulated by reference to religious rules which they alone could operate, they were able to maintain a strong position until its destruction in AD 70.

Progressives: the Pharisees

It may seem surprising to describe the Pharisees as ‘progressives’, but in the context of their day that is exactly what they were. Without questioning the authority of the scriptures, they recognized that times had changed and life in the Roman world was quite different from the sort of society envisaged in the Torah, so if the old traditions were to continue to be meaningful they would need to be applied in new ways. Since they still had a high regard for the actual words of the Hebrew Bible as given directly by God, they were not free to alter the original text, and so the next best thing was to create an authoritative commentary that would explain how its principles could be observed in the new circumstances. For example, the Ten Commandments instructed people to keep the sabbath day ‘holy’ (Exodus 20:8). But what did that really mean in everyday terms? What should people do and not do on the sabbath day? The additional rules devised by the Pharisees were intended to provide a practical answer to that kind of question. The Mishnah is a collection of material that reflects debates among religious leaders following the destruction of the temple in AD 70, though much of its material must have originated in the period immediately preceding that event and one of its sections in particular (Pirke Aboth) probably originated in Pharisaic circles. It opens with the recommendation to ‘make a fence for the Law’, which meant: ‘protect the Law from infringement by surrounding it with cautionary rules that can act as a warning notice to stop people before they get within breaking distance of the actual God-given commandments themselves’. The logic of that approach is clear enough, though critics complained that it too easily led to the multiplication of petty rules so that keeping the Law became an onerous burden rather than the joyful celebration of God’s goodness that it was meant to be. The Sadducees disliked them because they believed and did things that went well beyond a literal understanding of the Law of Moses but according to Josephus they were highly regarded by most of the population (Antiquities 18.1.3).

Jesus had much in common with the Pharisees and agreed with them on many issues, though he regularly denounced them as hypocrites, which in this context seems to have been a complaint that the keeping of these rules had become an

end in itself that diverted attention from the generosity of the original Law – something that is by no means unique to the Pharisees, and history has many examples of religious people who displace the core values of faith by an over-scrupulous attention to the outward trappings of religion. But the gospels depict Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees on more substantive grounds, for it seems that a person's ability to keep the rules had also become a form of social stratification, something that Jesus repeatedly questioned with his insistence that God had a special love for the outcasts and marginalized members of society, and a corresponding disdain for those whose only demonstration of faith was through the rituals of religious practice. The Pharisees also defined faithfulness as separation from others who did not share their understandings of ritual purity or personal morality – whereas to Jesus, it was possible to distinguish between a person and their behaviour, and to be involved with others in order to journey with them, and in the process show them a different way of being. As part of this, Jesus questioned any understanding that made rules and regulations (even those that might claim to be of divine origin) more important than people. He also challenged the supremacy of the traditional scriptures, for example on the matter of divorce, by going further back than the Law to the principles enshrined in belief in God as creator (Matthew 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–9). And he was not averse to highlighting the sort of self-righteous hypocrisy that characterizes many religious people – as when he invited those who were themselves perfect to initiate the stoning of a woman condemned for adultery (John 7:53–8:11). A good case can be made for supposing that members of Jesus' own family were Pharisees, and this is why he understood their attitudes so well – and also why he was far more critical of them than of any other single group of people he encountered. But behaviour was not the only topic on which the Pharisees had distinctive views. Unlike the Sadducees, they regarded the whole of the Hebrew scriptures (not just the Law of Moses) as authoritative, and they also had no difficulty in believing that there was a life after death. They may well have expected a Messiah to come and right the wrongs of their people, though they themselves never took part in open revolt against the Romans.

Numbers are notoriously difficult to estimate for a period so far in the past, but there is evidence to suggest that there may have been around six thousand Pharisees at the time of Jesus. Their origins are not entirely clear, but are certainly to be found in the days following the Maccabean Revolt and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty. The word 'Pharisee' is often said to be

derived from the Hebrew word parush which can mean ‘to separate’ and also ‘to interpret’. Whether these two meanings were connected in the Pharisaic mind is impossible to say – and in any case, ‘Pharisee’ seems to be the name given to them by other people, as their successors in the later rabbinic schools only ever referred to them as ‘the sages’. They had no political power but functioned as a group concerned to preserve the religious traditions in such a way that they could be observed in everyday life, especially in relation to matters of ritual purity. Some of them appear to have been full-time students of the scriptures, but a majority had ordinary jobs and being a Pharisee was not generally a professional occupation. They were of national importance, but their main strength was in local groups that could be found in most towns and villages throughout Palestine, each with their own officials and rules. Religiously, they were probably the most influential group during Jesus’ lifetime.

Monastics: the Essenes

The Essenes are mentioned by several ancient writers. Philo of Alexandria, the Latin author Pliny, and Josephus all mention them, though they are not explicitly named by any New Testament writers. Like the Sadducees and Pharisees, they originated in the period following the Maccabean Revolt but while the other two worked to achieve their political and religious ambitions within the system, the Essenes regarded the system itself as hopelessly corrupted and sought to live their life in isolation from mainstream society and instead wait for some divine intervention that would change things. Though there is a good deal of debate about the details, the majority of scholars would identify the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls as Essenes. This group settled at Qumrân near the north-west corner of the Dead Sea, an isolated location where they believed it would be easier to preserve the traditions of religious and moral purity which they found in the Hebrew Bible. Like the Pharisees, these people probably originated among the religious supporters of the Maccabees, but became disenchanted with the corruption of their successors the Hasmoneans and chose to withdraw from mainstream society to live in an isolated community in the desert where they felt they could more easily preserve the traditions of religious and moral purity which they believed they could find in the Hebrew Bible.

Not all Essenes lived isolated lives though, for Josephus says that they ‘occupy no one city, but settle in large numbers in every town.’ He also mentions others who, unlike the ascetic groups, were married, though he goes to some pains to make it clear that such relationships were regarded in purely functional terms, as a means of continuing the human race (Jewish Wars 2.8.2–13). There is also written evidence that another group lived in the desert near Damascus, whose organization was slightly different from the group at Qumrân. There is no clear account of the relationship between these various groups, nor any certain knowledge of how they might have been related to the Essenes apparently scattered throughout the towns and villages of Palestine, though the one thing that seems to unite them all is a desire to live in a distinctive style focused around devotion to the scriptures and commitment to one another. In that respect,

they have their counterparts in today's monastic movements, in which traditional monasteries still thrive as places of retreat and solitude alongside the new monasticism that embodies the same virtues but expresses them not by withdrawing from the wider culture but by engaging within it while pursuing a distinctive pattern of regular devotion.

The community at Qumrân is the best known because of the discovery of their writings, and at most points these documents are in harmony with the statements made by Josephus. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that the people of this community regarded themselves as the minority in Israel who were faithful to the scriptures and from their perspective the rest of the nation, including especially the priests and religious leaders in Jerusalem, had wilfully disregarded the true faith. Only their own leader, the 'Teacher of Righteousness', and his faithful followers had preserved knowledge of the true meaning of the ancient scriptures. Like some of the other religious groupings, the Essenes looked forward to a day of crisis in history when God's sovereignty over all things would be reaffirmed and in the process all infidels and unbelievers would be banished, including especially the Romans. The members of the group, rather than the whole Jewish nation, would then be recognized as God's chosen people, and they would take over the temple and renew its worship. They expected three leaders to appear in connection with these events: the coming prophet who had been predicted by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18–19); a royal Messiah who would be a descendant of King David; and a priestly Messiah who would be the most important. Every aspect of life had some religious significance so as to ensure they would be in a constant state of readiness for these events. This included extensive and regular ritual washings, while daily meals were regarded as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that would take place at the end of time.

There are many points of possible connection between the beliefs found at Qumrân and ideas circulating among the earliest Christians. John the Baptist's ministry took place in the Judean desert and involved cleansing through water as well as reflecting the same sort of ascetic lifestyle that is commended in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Scepticism about the temple can also be found in the preaching of Stephen (Acts 7:41–53), while the fascination with the little-known priest-king Melchizedek that is found in Hebrews (5:6–10; 6:20; 7:1–19) was

also central to some of the texts found at Qumrân. Then there is the importance of meals, not to mention the self-consciousness of being part of a distinctive community and the common use of certain terminologies to describe life in and out of the community (‘light and darkness’, ‘flesh and spirit’ and so on). But in all these cases, the Christian belief in Jesus gave a distinctive understanding and the most that can be said is that Essenism offers a glimpse of a particular section of Judaism that illustrates some of the ways in which the earliest Christians sought to contextualize their message within the wider cultural situation of the day.

Militants: the Zealots

These people were probably not a unified or co-ordinated movement, but the term is still a useful way to refer to those individuals and groups who became most involved in direct action against the Romans. Josephus names their founder as Judas, a Galilean who led a revolt in AD 6 at about the same time as Archelaus was removed from office by the Romans (Jewish Wars 2.8.1), though there is some doubt as to how widely the actual term ‘zealot’ was used before the time of the final Jewish War of AD 66–70. He also reports that

these men agree in everything with the opinions of the Pharisees, but they have an insatiable passion for liberty; and they are convinced that God alone is to be their only master and Lord… no fear can compel them to give this title to anyone else…

Antiquities 18.1.6

While Pharisees were prepared to challenge the system from within, the Zealots could not reconcile rule by God with any level of acceptance of Roman rule. The Zealots continued as a guerrilla movement until the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, and perhaps sporadically even after that. At least one of Jesus’ disciples, Simon, is identified as a Zealot (Luke 6:15), though Mark (3:18) describes him as a ‘Cananaean’ which seems to be an alternative description. It is also often thought that Judas Iscariot was a Zealot because one branch of these revolutionaries was known as the sicarii, or ‘knife-men’, a word that sounds a bit like ‘Iscariot’ (Mark 3:19). But more typical Zealots seem to have been individuals like Barabbas whom the crowd chose to liberate in preference to Jesus (Mark 15:6–15), or the unnamed rabble-rouser with whom Paul was once confused (Acts 21:37–39).

Dreamers: the Apocalyptists

Most people would not be members of any of these groups. Membership of the Sadducees was largely determined by birth, and though anyone could become a Pharisee it required a particular mindset and mode of thinking – while the lifestyle of Essenes and Zealots both required more self-denying commitment than most felt able to give. Throughout all ages and in all cultures, the people who most easily capture the popular imagination are those who know how to tell a good story and there was no shortage of such individuals in Jewish culture. These are the apocalyptists – individuals who could take the vague hopes for a better future and turn them into engaging narratives depicting how God would turn the tables on the oppressors and bring to fruition the expectations of a better world that had been promised in the Hebrew scriptures. Arguably they are the ones who are most typical of the spiritual aspirations of a majority of the population, and they are the only group for whom we have direct access to their own writings, which is why it is worth giving more extensive coverage of them here.

The literary style of these dreamers is well represented in the many books that they created, known as ‘apocalypses’ (a Greek word meaning ‘a revealing of secrets’). They cannot easily be identified with any of the other groups, though they were certainly not Sadducees, since their central claim was that they had received new revelations from God (something that by definition the Sadducees would not countenance, since they considered Moses was the only one who had ever received divine revelation). Think of them rather as the tabloid journalists who expanded and illustrated the divine plan for the world and its people that Pharisees and Essenes expressed in more conventional terms. The apocalyptic writings have a number of unusual characteristics which make them readily recognizable:

Their stories are set in some other world, rather than this one. Though events here do feature, they are important only in so far as they reveal something about

what is happening in another world. One apocalyptic writer states that ‘the Most High has made not one world but two’ (2 Esdras 7:50, NRSV), and the apocalyptic dreamers revealed what was happening in God’s world as a way of reassuring their readers that, however tough life might seem to be, they were at the centre of God’s future plans. In the process of doing so, they offered bizarre, and sometimes lurid, accounts of life in this other world.

Because of the emphasis on other worlds, the apocalyptic writings are characterized by stories of how their heroes had dreams, saw visions, and met with angels, not to mention out-of-body experiences and even astral projection. Since God is remote in a different world (‘heaven’), intermediaries play a key role in dealings between people and God, and a typical apocalypse offers an extended report of how its writer received speculative visions and messages revealing what is happening in heaven.

Corresponding with this is an unusual literary form. For the visions are not described in straightforward terms, but invariably use coded language. There are often references to esoteric passages in the books of the Hebrew prophets, and mythological beasts and symbolic numbers are used to represent nations or individuals.

Apocalypses were normally written under the name of a great figure of the past. Enoch, Noah, Adam, Moses, and Ezra are only a few of the ancient heroes who had apocalyptic works attributed to them. This may have been necessary to protect the identities of their authors (apocalypses were invariably written in circumstances of persecution), though it could also have been that the time of genuine prophecy was believed to have passed, and therefore anyone wishing to get a hearing for their message had to attribute their work to somebody who had actually lived in the age when the Hebrew scriptures were in process of compilation. Revelation, the only New Testament book to use extensive apocalyptic imagery, is unique in this respect, and though there is a good deal of debate as to who its author actually was, he is named as a contemporary and friend of his readers, not someone from the distant past (Revelation 1:1–9).

It is not hard to see why this kind of dreaming became so popular in the centuries immediately before the birth of Jesus. Life under the Romans was very hard, and in previous generations the prophets had often suggested that there was a cause and effect relationship between religious faithfulness and the political fortunes of their people. It was a simple notion, that when people were obedient to the divine Law they prospered, and if not they could expect hard times – but the reality of life did not always match the theory. It was easy enough to look back and see some truth in it in relation to the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, and the exile of its population to Babylon. But when some of those exiles subsequently returned to their homeland they had been determined not to make the same mistakes again, and the reinstatement of the nation had included an uncompromising application of the Law to all aspects of life. But as things turned out, these people did not prosper either, and it soon began to look as if the way to prosperity had nothing to do with faithfulness in relation to ancient religious precepts, but was going to be found through collaboration with infidels such as the Romans. From the time of Antiochus onwards, those who tried to keep the faith most rigorously found themselves in a minority, while those who prospered often did so by sitting loosely to it, or even abandoning it altogether.

Why did faithfulness not lead to prosperity? Why were good people suffering? Why did God not put an end to the power of evil forces? It was as a response to these questions that the apocalyptists began dreaming their dreams to connect the present with the future in a way that reassured the faithful that the present difficulties were only temporary and that good would eventually triumph and the oppressive domination of evil would soon be overcome. It is often asked whether Jesus had any connection with these apocalyptists and their visions of the heavenly world. Like them, Jesus was a master storyteller with big dreams about how things might be reimagined, and though his stories were more often rooted in everyday experiences of home life, he was clearly familiar with the way the apocalyptists thought, sometimes using similar imagery and language in his own teachings (Mark 13; Matthew 24–25; Luke 21). But there are also some important differences between them:

Apocalyptic literature always focused on visions and similar experiences that offered their recipients some insight into the heavenly world that they would otherwise not have, whereas Jesus speaks plainly and on his own authority. In addition, his main concern was not with the affairs of some other world beyond this one, but with life in this world. He was not concerned with revealing secrets, but with inviting others to see the world differently and commit themselves to a new way of being that would transform both themselves and the wider society.

A major intention of apocalyptic stories is to encourage people by demonstrating that they were in the right, and their enemies would soon be overcome. But Jesus' teaching, even in what are sometimes identified as 'apocalyptic discourses' such as Mark 13 or Matthew 24–25, was never designed to reinforce the status quo. Nor did he suggest that disciples would automatically triumph over their enemies: on the contrary, whenever Jesus spoke of future possibilities, it was always in a context of challenging his disciples and reminding them that they, along with all others, fell short of God's values and intentions for human life.

Jesus seems not to have had the sort of systematic and detailed view of the future that characterizes the apocalyptic outlook, with every detail already mapped out in God's predetermined plan. Indeed, he discounted the possibility that the divine plan might be uncovered through the sort of speculations represented by apocalyptic literature, and categorically asserted that he did not know it himself (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32). No apocalyptist would ever have said that.

Apocalyptic writers were almost invariably pessimistic about the world and its history. Unlike the prophets of earlier generations, they despaired of God ever being able to work in the world. The forces of evil seemed too powerful for that, and they saw the world running headlong to a final and tragic end. There was no point trying to discover God at work in the midst of such evil, for God was not there. This is in marked contrast to the outlook of Jesus, who made it abundantly plain that the 'kingdom of God' which he had come to inaugurate would affect

the everyday life of ordinary people in this world (Luke 4:16–21). By both precept and example, he declared that God's will was not something to be done 'in heaven', but was meant to impact the social and political realities of life here and now (Matthew 6:10).

Rejects: the Samaritans

The Samaritans cannot be categorized as a religious strand within Judaism as they were, by definition, not Jews, but since they feature from time to time in the New Testament they are included here for the sake of completeness. Like many other aspects of the religious life of the time, the origins and identity of those people who are described in the New Testament as ‘Samaritans’ is somewhat unclear but one thing is certain: they were regarded as outcasts and rejects by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. For a long time it was supposed that they must be the descendants of the original inhabitants of Samaria, the city which in the period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been the capital of the north and which was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC. On this understanding the Samaritans would be the remnant of the population of Israel that escaped exile in Assyria and who were later viewed with suspicion as religious renegades by Ezra and Nehemiah. But nothing that is reported of those people corresponds with what is known of the Samaritans of the New Testament period. Far from being open to influences from other religious traditions (as Ezra and Nehemiah found), these people appear to have been very conservative, sharing with traditional Judaism a strong commitment to belief in only one God, along with sabbath observance, circumcision, and rigid adherence to the food laws. They regarded only the first five books of the scriptures as authoritative (and had their own version of them), and they also had their own expectation of a messianic figure, the ta’eb or ‘one who returns’ so as to restore all things. The one thing that distinguished them is highlighted in Jesus’ exchange with a Samaritan woman: the question of whether God might be worshipped on Mount Gerizim (in Samaritan territory) as well as in Jerusalem, and whether their priesthood or the Jerusalem one was the more authentic (John 4:1–42). It is impossible to say where the Samaritans of New Testament times came from, but they were certainly a religious sect rather than an ethnic grouping. Probably they emerged, along with many others, in the turbulent times following the Maccabean Revolt. Their distinctive beliefs can certainly all be found within groups that would be regarded as in the mainstream of Judaism of the time: like the Sadducees, they paid special attention to the Torah; like the Pharisees they expected a messiah figure; and like the Essenes of Qumrân they questioned the legitimacy of Jerusalem and its temple.

To be sure, Jesus occasionally gave his teaching in the language and imagery of the popular apocalyptic teachers, just as he referred to the ‘Golden Rule’ of the rabbis (Matthew 7:12). As a good teacher he realized that he needed to speak the language of his hearers, and it is highly likely that the future dreamed of by the apocalyptists played a significant role in the spirituality of many ordinary people. But there were some fundamental differences between Jesus and the apocalyptists as he took familiar concepts and gave them a new meaning.

The cultural environment of Palestine at the time of Jesus was in ferment at many levels, with political tensions and religious fervour both playing a significant role. The one thing that is clear is that with the possible exception of the Sadducees, all the dominant groups were looking for God to intervene directly in the affairs of their people, though they had different ideas about what God should do, and when and how it might all happen. Zealots were prepared to give God a helping hand when they thought it necessary, while Pharisees and Essenes regarded the divine plan as fixed and predetermined, which meant it could be neither changed nor enforced by human intervention – possibilities that were made accessible to the wider population by the dreams of the apocalyptists. However it was expressed, people were longing for a new direction in the fortunes of their nation. All these factors combined to produce a great sense of expectation, fuelled by much speculation about the meaning of the scriptures, and facilitated by the social and political ferment of the time.

Keeping the faith

Members of the religious groups mentioned by Josephus and others were all enthusiasts, but for a majority of the population religious observance was more mundane and predictable. Jerusalem was always going to be a magnet for the faithful because of its temple which was the only place authorized for full participation in the ancient rituals of worship, but this was not a journey that people would make very often. When he was twelve years old, Jesus' parents famously lost him in the temple at Jerusalem in the course of what is described as their annual pilgrimage (Luke 2:41–52). Everyday spirituality was celebrated in more local contexts.

The synagogue

In the time of Jesus, even a small settlement like Nazareth had its own synagogue (Luke 4:16–30), and this is where a majority of its inhabitants would gather on a regular basis. The synagogues were a relatively recent innovation, originating not in Palestine but in the wider dispersion (or Diaspora) of Jewish people that followed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. For those living in cities far removed from Jerusalem, a visit to the temple was often a once in a lifetime occasion, and there was an urgent need for more accessible ways to keep the faith. Convention dictated that animal sacrifices could only legitimately be offered in Jerusalem, and though the Jewish community at Elephantine in Egypt built their own temple that was the exception, and there was no widespread appetite for flouting the rules. But there was a clear need for something to be put in its place, and that was the synagogue, in which a form of worship emerged that had no sacrifice but instead placed a new emphasis on those traditional observances that could be carried out anywhere: prayer, the reading of the Torah, keeping the sabbath day, circumcision, and the observance of the ancient regulations concerning the preparation and consumption of food. Synagogues were built wherever there was a big enough Jewish population, and served as cultural community centres as well as places of prayer. The new forms of worship that developed became so successful that in due course they were established in local communities throughout Palestine itself.

Not all synagogues were exactly the same. Unlike the worship of the temple, for which there was a specific mandate in the Hebrew Bible, the synagogue had no scriptural foundation which meant that local synagogues had much greater freedom to develop their own ways of thinking. This was a natural outcome of their origins in the wider world beyond Palestinian culture, for the challenges facing Jewish people in Babylon were quite different from the challenges facing Jews in Rome, while the Egyptian city of Alexandria was different again. People had to work out for themselves how best to adapt their ancestral faith to the demands and opportunities of their new environments. Even within the same locality different synagogues might reach different conclusions, with some

congregations quite happy to go along with many aspects of pagan society, even giving their children Latin or Greek names and eagerly embracing the art-forms of Roman civilization, while others in the same city deplored that as a dilution and betrayal of their ancestral faith and stuck rigidly to a more literal understanding of the Law. It seems that the same distinctions were reflected in the synagogues of Palestine, and even in Jerusalem there were more conservative synagogues alongside more liberal ones. The clashes between their respective ideologies influenced the development of the earliest Christian churches, with the outlook of individuals like Stephen, who belonged to a Hellenist synagogue at the liberal end of the Jewish spectrum (Acts 6:8–8:1), contrasting sharply with the likes of James who was much more at home in a deeply conservative environment (Acts 15:1–21; 21:17–26; Galatians 2:11–12).

The festivals

Judaism was a religion of observance, whose contours were marked out by the regular celebration of religious festivals. They ranged from the sabbath, which was a weekly celebration, to holy days that occurred just once a year, such as the Day of Atonement. Not all the historic festivals feature in the New Testament stories, but some are of considerable significance for understanding the life of the earliest churches.

Sabbath

It is impossible to read far in any of the gospels without encountering issues related to the sabbath. Sabbath observance surfaces within the first two or three pages of Mark and is never far from the centre of the action thereafter. Jesus was roundly condemned by religious leaders when he insisted on healing people on the sabbath or allowed his disciples to pick ears of grain as they walked through a cornfield (Mark 3:1–6; 2:23–28). This was more than an argument about social convention. Observance of the sabbath as a day of rest was enshrined in the Ten Commandments, which in turn claimed it went back to creation itself. People were to rest on the seventh day because ‘I, the Lord, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested’ (Exodus 20:11). In Jesus’ day, defining the sabbath rest had become a major preoccupation for some religious experts. What does it mean to rest – or, for that matter, for it to be the sabbath? Since in the Jewish reckoning a day ran not from midnight to midnight but from sunset to sunset, who could tell precisely when any given sabbath would begin and end? In order to ensure that faithful believers would never risk breaking the sabbath itself, other subsidiary regulations had been developed to protect the law itself, though it was well known that those in the know often managed to stretch the rules beyond breaking point by adopting practices that might appear to keep the letter of the law while denying the spirit of it. The notion of a sabbath day’s journey was typical. There was a secondary regulation that defined the distance of an allowable journey as 2,000 cubits, but it was possible to travel further without actually breaking the law by designating a

point 2,000 cubits from one's normal residence as 'home' for the sabbath day, maybe by storing some food there in advance – which would then give a legal entitlement to travel at least 4,000 cubits, if not more! In the light of this sort of casuistry, Jesus had good reason to ask why it was considered wrong to heal someone on the sabbath (Mark 3:4). His insistence that 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27, NRSV) became one of the main bones of contention between him and his opponents.

Passover

This festival was less contentious for the early Christians, not least because it was the occasion of Jesus' crucifixion which meant that it would never remain simply a Jewish festival but could be endowed with its own particular Christian meaning. Like the sabbath it was celebrated in the home, though because of its significance it was one of the major pilgrim festivals for which Jewish believers would travel to Jerusalem from all over the world. Its origins are to be found in the events surrounding the exodus, and on this night family groups would tell the story of how their ancestors had been delivered from slavery in Egypt and in the process of doing so would re-enact key elements of the narrative. Jesus' family were in the habit of making a regular annual trip to Jerusalem for this celebration (Luke 2:41), where they would be joined by tens of thousands of others who came from all over the Roman empire. Some aspects of the celebrations took place in the temple itself, notably the killing of the lambs that constituted the main dish of the Passover meal. But even those who had travelled to Jerusalem from a distance then met in their family groups to share the meal and tell the traditional story. The actual boundaries of Jerusalem were extended to accommodate this influx of people, with homes that were normally not considered part of the city itself being temporarily designated as such so that everyone could celebrate the event in a location that, at least for that night, was within the city. The story of Jesus' last meal with his disciples reflects this tradition, as they too were visitors to the city and needed to hire a room from a local householder for the purpose (Mark 14:12–25). Though there is no mention of a lamb being consumed by the disciples, all the other aspects of their meal reflect rituals connected with Passover observance.

Pentecost

This is the other major festival to feature in the New Testament. This was so called because it took place on the fiftieth day (seven weeks plus one day) after Passover and the start of the harvest. It was originally known as the Feast of Weeks, and was the main harvest festival though by New Testament times it was also an occasion to mark the giving of the Torah to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Like Passover, it was another festival that attracted considerable numbers of pilgrims from all around the empire. For the early church it came to have an entirely different significance, for this day marked the occasion on which a dispirited band of disciples gained new confidence through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and when Peter saw 3,000 people accept his message about Jesus (Acts 2:41). The fact that they were visitors drawn from all over the empire then played an important part in the rapid spread of the church well beyond the boundaries of Palestine, as they returned to their home cities and reported what they had heard.

Fasts and new moons

Like the more significant festivals, these occasions also had their origins in the Hebrew scriptures. They would be part and parcel of the life of all faithful families, and along with sabbath-keeping and food regulations were the source of much debate – and not a little controversy – in some of the churches in the wider empire. Colossians provides evidence for some Christians who were using these traditions as a way of disciplining their bodily functions in the hope of making themselves more spiritually attuned, a practice that Paul rejected as being not only unnecessary but also in conflict with some fundamental aspects of Christian belief (Colossians 2:16–19).

Home and family life

It is easy to describe the context of the New Testament only by reference to influential people, who by definition were always in the minority. The lives of less influential people often remained undocumented and are correspondingly more difficult to reconstruct, but they were the majority. So what was life like for ordinary people in the villages of Palestine at the time of Jesus?

Men and women

From a 21st-century perspective it would be accurate to describe Jewish culture at this time as strongly patriarchal, with men holding all the reins of power and decision-making, in the community as well as the home. In the context of the day, however, some surprising questions were being asked about family relationships. The scriptures may have given men absolute power over their wives, but discussions were taking place among the rabbis about the meaning of some of these stipulations. One of the issues on which Jesus was invited to offer an opinion was the matter of divorce and remarriage, and the way in which the question was put to him shows a clear connection with debates between two leading thinkers of the day, the rabbis Hillel and Shammai. The one believed that traditional interpretations could still be sustained and a man ought to be free to divorce his wife for any trivial reason. The other (Shammai) proposed that the right of a man to divorce his wife should always have a moral dimension and sexual infidelity was the only appropriate grounds on which this could be justified. Given the culture of the day, in which a man could rape a woman and she was then labelled an adulterer, this could hardly be described as a feminist agenda – but by any reckoning it was more progressive than earlier practices. Jesus raised the discussion of such matters to another level altogether, not only by refusing to collaborate with the imposition of the death penalty on a woman apparently caught in the act of adultery (John 8:2–11) but also by including women among his regular companions and discussing theology with them. This was such a striking and surprising aspect of Jesus' lifestyle that the gospel writers continue the theme, even depicting women as the key witnesses to the resurrection and the first Christian preachers – something that went well beyond the inherited social attitudes of the day.

In spite of the fact that such debates could take place between religious teachers, actual family life had changed little. It was unusual for a man to have several wives, though arranged marriages were still the norm and everyone was expected to marry, usually in their early teens for girls and at age eighteen for men. While not entirely unknown, it would have been very unusual for a man not to marry at all and there was a proverb quoted by many rabbis saying that

‘He who has no wife lives without joy, blessing, or good’. The fact that rabbis took an interest in such matters highlights the way that marriage was regarded as a religious affair rather than a civil matter, though of course in a Jewish context it was always difficult to separate life into distinctive spheres like this because religious values and attitudes were all pervasive and affected just about anything that anyone might think of doing. Many aspects of marriage in this context were similar to practices in the wider Hellenistic world, especially the actual traditions that both preceded and followed the formal ceremony. Marriage was not just a matter for the individuals concerned but was a contract between two families. The actual process started with a betrothal, which itself had the same legal standing as marriage and involved various commitments on behalf of the parties. This was the state of Mary and Joseph’s relationship when she became pregnant, and it explains why there would have been legal procedures to go through had Joseph decided to abandon her at that time (Matthew 1:18–19). While it was not unknown for a man to move into the bride’s family home without any further ceremony, this was not generally approved of by the religious authorities. More usually there would be a formal ceremony at which the bride would be escorted from her own family home to the bridegroom’s home, where promises would be made under a canopy specially constructed for the purpose, after which there would be celebration and feasting that lasted over a period of a whole week.

Children and schooling

Having children was regarded as an essential part of life, and women who turned out to be infertile could expect to find themselves cast aside. Sons were especially valued as they would continue the family name. They were also the only ones who might receive some education, though there was no agreed opinion as to what that might be. When Antiochus IV instituted his program of Hellenization in 167 BC he established a Greek school in Jerusalem that was intended to mirror the educational institutions of the wider world in which boys regularly began formal education at the age of seven and then in their later teens progressed to the ‘gymnasium’ with its syllabus of philosophy, poetry, music, drama, and rhetoric – along with athletics and other sporting activities. What angered religious traditionalists at the time was not just the emphasis on Greek literature and learning, but the inclusion of physical activities that required scanty clothing or, in some cases, no clothes at all. As a result, this was a short-lived experiment that did not survive for long, and traditional models prevailed to ensure that education would continue to be mostly of a religious nature.

Children were generally deemed old enough to learn to read the scriptures by the age of five, and would do so either in the home or in the synagogue, where the teacher would be a scribe or maybe the attendant who looked after the place. Memorization of scripture played a large part, and familiarity with aspects of the synagogue liturgy would also be included. Most Jewish boys would continue in the environment of this ‘house of reading’ (the beth sepher) until about the age of thirteen, when the more gifted ones might proceed to the beth midrash (‘house of instruction’). Having learned the basic contents of the Torah, this next level offered the opportunity to explore the commentaries on the law that had been developed by the rabbis. After that, those who were destined to be rabbis themselves would move on to more advanced study under the direction of a leading rabbi in Jerusalem. Over and above all this, every Jewish boy, regardless of his social circumstances or educational accomplishment, was required to learn a craft.

We can see all this system in the story of Paul who had his early education in his home city of Tarsus, but was sent to Jerusalem where he studied with the rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) – yet at the same time, he also had a practical trade. This career path gave Paul immediate access to the religious authorities, though when some others who had not enjoyed the same opportunities demonstrated before the Sanhedrin their familiarity with the interpretation of scripture, their questioners were amazed at the knowledge of apparently uneducated individuals (Acts 4:13). Jesus provoked a similar combination of admiration and resentment when, after reading the scriptures in his home synagogue (something that would have been open to a person with his level of education), he then proceeded to offer an interpretation of it (something that was the preserve of those who had received a higher level of education, Luke 4:16–30). Of course, he may well have belonged to a family with close ties to the Pharisees, which could help to explain the ease with which he engaged with their concerns, even from an early age (Luke 2:41–51). The vitriolic exchanges he later had with them would certainly be characteristic of someone who had been raised in a tradition but then questioned it – while his brother James was described both in the book of Acts and by Josephus as being an active Pharisee.

Work and home

It has been estimated that the population of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus was as many as 50,000 regular residents, though that figure was increased on a regular basis as pilgrims travelled from around the world to celebrate major festivals such as Passover or Pentecost. As in most cities, a majority of the people living in first-century Jerusalem were relatively poor and depended for their livelihood on the business ventures of those who were more well-off. The houses of the poor were simple and closely crowded in narrow streets, though there is no evidence of the sort of multi-storey tenements that housed working populations in a city like Rome. Alongside them, though, were large houses built to Roman designs, with under-floor heating and piped water supplies. Little now remains of the streets themselves from this period, but there is evidence of some paved roads that were flanked by stone holders for torches that, when lit, would serve as street lights. Given the amount of building work that was initiated by Herod the Great, we can be sure that Jerusalem must have been a pleasant city with some grand buildings, both public and private.

Most people lived in much smaller communities focused around the two occupations that are most frequently mentioned in the stories of Jesus: fishing and farming. Both of them could create significant wealth for business owners, though rich country people are generally less ostentatious than their urban counterparts. In New Testament times there was a flourishing fishing industry based around the inland Sea of Galilee and it was among these people that Jesus found his first followers. It is easy to construct a romantic image of these disciples as hard-working but poverty-stricken individuals, though the reality was probably quite different. The brothers Peter and Andrew, and James and John, clearly had their own businesses and would be quite well-off. Not only did they own rather substantial homes but they were also able to take time out of their work to travel with Jesus knowing that others would carry on in their absence. The same can be said of those whom he attracted in the farming community – for why else would you tell a story about farmers who were so successful that they built bigger barns, if you were not speaking to exactly the sort of person for whom that might be a real possibility (Luke 12:13–21)?

Little is known about the sort of food that formed the daily diet, though it is unlikely to have been anything like as rich as can be imagined from reading the various food laws that were intrinsic to the faithful practice of the Jewish religion. The sheer variety of different meats and the scriptural instructions about how food was to be prepared, cooked, and eaten can create the impression that there was a huge choice available. In reality, meat was a treat for special occasions, not only in the villages but also among city-dwellers. The sacrifice of animals continued to play a central part in temple worship and in that context their meat was cooked and eaten in the nearest thing that ancient Jerusalem had to a restaurant. But going to the temple for a meal with one's friends and family was not an everyday occurrence. For many, it must have been a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But wherever it was consumed, food was always governed by strict religious regulations, as indeed was the whole of life. Food laws dictated the preparation of food and in New Testament times this involved many rituals of washing. In earlier times, the high priest had been required to wash his hands before engaging in any ritual practices (Exodus 30:19; 40:13) but by the time of Jesus many devout people were doing it as part of their normal routine and would regularly wash their hands first thing in the morning and then again before meals. Such practices had nothing to do with hygiene but were intended to ensure an individual's ritual purity. Since none of this had actually been required by the traditional laws, that offered plenty of scope for later rule-makers who had even developed regulations prescribing exactly which parts of the hands should be washed and the order in which it should be done. Combining these practices with the complex dietary rules of the Torah meant that even a simple thing like eating food could provoke lengthy religious debate. When Jesus was challenged about his own failure to keep all these regulations, he refused to discuss it, preferring instead to state (quoting Isaiah) that for him rules of this sort were unnecessary additions to the scripture: 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition' (Mark 7:8, NRSV). As if to reinforce his indifference to such matters he went on to talk about the things that, in his opinion, really could make a person unclean: 'greed, deceit, indecency, jealousy, slander, pride and folly' (Mark 7:22, author's translation). If some members of Jesus' own family were Pharisees, that may easily explain how he came to be so well acquainted with this kind of behaviour, even though it was not, so far as is known, official Pharisaic policy.

Rites of passage

In the ancient world a woman was regarded as not having fulfilled her true purpose in life until she gave birth, preferably to a male child. The safe arrival of a child was always a time for joyful celebration and the stories of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus both mention this (Luke 1:14, 57–58; 2:13). Children were named at birth, and the name generally expressed some aspiration for the person whom the baby might become, or the qualities that he or she would display in later life. In the case of Jesus, his name was known long before his birth, being revealed in angelic encounters not only to his father Joseph, which convention might have expected (Matthew 1:21), but also to his mother Mary, which was quite unexpected (Luke 1:31). For a male child circumcision was a regular part of the celebrations of the birth, and occurred on the eighth day after birth in the context of a religious ceremony (Luke 2:21). Circumcision was not unique to the Jewish community, but in that context it was regarded as an initiation rite signifying membership of the nation and faithfulness to its traditions. Since male circumcision was essential for full membership of the Jewish religious community, and since Jesus and his disciples were all Jewish and his message was, from one perspective, a form of revised Judaism, it was inevitable that the issue of circumcision should become especially contentious once Gentiles were attracted into the Christian faith. There was much controversy over the question of whether it might be necessary for a person to become a Jew first, in order to be a proper Christian. The argument raged not just in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–21) but also among converts with no previous connection to Judaism (Galatians). Christians with no background in Judaism were soon in the majority and it disappeared as a practical question though it continued to be discussed on a theological level for centuries – for if the church was in some sense a successor to the divine community of the Hebrew scriptures, in which the sign of membership was circumcision, how and why was it no longer a valid religious practice?

Coming of age is the next significant point in life, though our knowledge of the way in which this was marked in New Testament times is somewhat fragmented. In the Jewish community today, a boy’s coming of age is marked by a Bar

Mitzvah ceremony at age thirteen, with a similar Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls. But the Bar Mitzvah first appears in the Talmud, while the idea of a ceremony for a girl is a much more recent innovation. However, since thirteen was the age at which a child might progress from the beth sepher to the beth midrash it is a reasonable supposition that this was probably also the age at which a boy was deemed to have become a man. An indirect confirmation of this may be found in Luke's story of Jesus being in the temple at only twelve years old and already engaging with the teachers of the law as an equal – suggesting that, even before he was old enough to receive formal training in such matters, he had an innate understanding of the traditions of his people (Luke 2:41–52).

The final rite of passage was, of course, death, and in all societies this would be marked by elaborate rituals of one sort or another. Because of the climate – not to mention religious considerations that regarded a dead body as ritually unclean – the marking of death generally began with the funeral rather than ending with it as often happens in Western society today. A body would be prepared for burial by being washed and then wrapped in a shroud, all of which might be accompanied by the ministrations of professional mourners who knew how to weep in an appropriately demonstrative way. But the burial itself would have to take place speedily, preferably on the day of the death. All these features can be found in New Testament passages that refer to death (for example, Mark 5:38–39; John 19:39–40; Acts 9:36–37). Disposal of a body in Palestine was invariably by burial, though it was also common for the remains to be exhumed after a year, when the bones could be gathered together and placed in an ossuary that would occupy a smaller space. This is probably the context in which Jesus recommended one of his followers to 'let the dead bury their own dead' (Matthew 8:21–22), where the reference would be not to the initial funeral that took place at the death of the questioner's father, but this subsequent ceremony held to gather up the bones of the dead and marking the final conclusion of the time of mourning. So when Joseph of Arimathea offered his own grave for the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42–47), he would have assumed it was only a temporary arrangement, as the bones would not rest there for ever. In the event, of course, they were there for a much shorter period than even he could ever have foreseen. The sort of grave described in that story (Mark 16:3–4) and also in the account of Lazarus's burial (John 11:38), a cave whose opening could be closed with a large stone, was typical of Palestinian customs of the time, but was not the only pattern. A grave might also be below ground where its presence

would be marked by a brightly painted plaque – not to celebrate the life of the deceased as in a modern cemetery, but to warn the unwary of their presence so they could avoid accidental ritual contamination through walking over them – something that Jesus used to devastating effect in describing his religious antagonists (Matthew 23:27).

PART 2

JESUS

CHAPTER 3

BIRTH AND EARLY YEARS

If there is one consistent theme that runs through all the stories of the events surrounding Jesus' birth, it is the repeated claim that ordinary people had more insight than religious experts when it came to understanding its significance. Those who were great and good mostly failed to recognize this child who was later claimed to be the expected Messiah, while simple people on the margins identified him right away. Luke's account opens with the otherwise unknown priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth praying for God to deliver their people, and being rewarded for their faithfulness by the announcement of the birth of their own son, later to be known as John the Baptist (Luke 1:5–28, 57–80). Mary, the mother of Jesus, belonged to the same family and at the time of Jesus' conception and birth she was in the process of getting married to Joseph. This was an extended business, and it could take several months with multiple betrothal ceremonies before a couple were formally recognized as husband and wife. Joseph has traditionally been described as a carpenter, though as was pointed out in the Introduction, the Greek word used to describe him (tektōn) indicates that he was more likely a general builder, the kind of person who could turn his hand to just about anything in the construction industry. At the time, there was plenty of work in Palestine for such a person, so Joseph and Mary are unlikely to have been extremely poor, though they would not have been rich. More importantly from the religious perspective, as ordinary working people they would be regarded as quite unqualified when it came to understanding the Hebrew scriptures and applying them to the events of their own time in order to discern God's will for their people. They were part of the 'people of the land', whose endeavours were a necessary part of the national economy but whom the religious establishment would have considered incapable of spiritual insight.

The striking poetry of Mary's hymn of praise (the 'Magnificat') celebrates this theme (Luke 1:46–55) that all the leading characters in the nativity stories were of little consequence to the political and religious establishment of the day, even

if they were not necessarily economically disadvantaged. Some shepherds in the Judean hills were first to hear the announcement of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8–20) followed by Simeon and Anna in the temple (Luke 2:25–38) – all of them inconsequential characters to the ruling elite. The stories in the first chapters of Luke's Gospel emphasize that officialdom – whether political or religious – had no eyes with which to recognize Jesus. This lesson is repeated throughout the story of Jesus' life, as it becomes clear that to have a real understanding of his message even the most important people must become like little children (Luke 18:17).

The birth of Jesus

The stories of Jesus' birth are familiar to most people from the traditional celebrations of Christmas: his pregnant mother was forced to leave her own home in Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem along with Joseph because of a Roman census that required them to be counted in the city of Joseph's forebears. There was no accommodation available when they arrived, and as a consequence they found themselves spending the night in a stable surrounded by animals, and this is where Jesus was born. The story is appealing, and not entirely implausible – though the reality was almost certainly somewhat different. For as far back as anyone could remember, hospitality had always been a major priority in Jewish society and the importance of welcoming the stranger is deeply embedded in some of the oldest sections of the Hebrew scriptures. Anyone arriving unannounced in even the smallest settlement would expect to be welcomed, and it was a well-established custom that travellers would head for the central space in a community and wait there for someone to invite them in, along with any animals that may be accompanying them (Judges 19:15–21). Joseph and Mary were not arriving in Bethlehem as strangers, as it was apparently Joseph's home town where there would no doubt be many of his relatives with their own houses to which they could welcome guests. Moreover, in spite of the many romantic depictions of Joseph and Mary as marginalized and homeless, there is plenty of evidence to show that this was far from the truth, and in today's terminology Joseph would be regarded as a middle-class business owner. The likelihood is that his extended family would also be reasonably well-off, and would be expected to provide accommodation for their relatives when they visited. There was no single design of house at this period, but a common structure would have a space on the ground floor where the family would live, and in which any animals would also be kept safe overnight. Above that would be a second storey which would be available when required as a guest room, and then another space on the flat roof which was mostly used for domestic work but which could also double up as overnight accommodation if required. The most likely scenario is that Joseph and Mary would indeed be welcomed by their relatives, but by the time they arrived others were already installed in the regular guest room, and as a consequence they were accommodated not in there but on the ground floor along with the resident family and their animals. Far from being born in a cold stable, Jesus was born in the warmest part of the house, surrounded by the

animals who brought their own heat (and was a major reason why family members slept in the same space), and the manger filled with their straw was his first resting place. It is almost impossible to imagine that in the culture of the day Joseph's extended family would have refused to welcome any visiting relative, though that is not the only reason for questioning the traditional image of a baby being born outside and in a cold stable. It is often the case that translators of the New Testament use terminology that suits their own expectations, and we will encounter other examples of that in relation to some of the writings of Paul. Here, the Greek word kataluma in Luke 2:7 has conventionally been translated as 'there was no place for them in the inn' (NRSV, author's italics), whereas in other contexts it means the second-storey guest room of a house. An example of that is in Luke 22:11, where the same word is used to describe the location of Jesus' last supper – and in that context translators typically translate it as 'the upper room' or 'the guest room', presumably because they could never imagine the last supper taking place in an 'inn'. There is certainly evidence that Jesus' relatives rejected him later when he had grown up and they heard what he had to say (Luke 4:14–30; John 7:5), but the images of his birth taking place in a miserable inhospitable environment owe more to the romantic fictions of later generations than to the stories of the New Testament. It is a reminder of how easy it is to replace what the New Testament actually says with inherited impressions of what people – Christians as well as others – assume it says.

The date

The introduction has already explained why Jesus was not born in the year zero, or in AD 1, though the New Testament evidence raises some other questions in relation to the actual date when he might have been born:

According to Matthew 2:1, Jesus was born ‘in Bethlehem of Judea in the reign of Herod the king’ (author’s translation), which places it before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC.

Luke locates his story in the wider context of Roman affairs by recording that Jesus was born during ‘the first enrolment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria’ (2:2, author’s translation). Josephus mentions an imperial representative called Quirinius being sent to Syria and Judea to take a census just after the beginning of the Christian era (Jewish Antiquities 18.1), though that census took place as part of the clearing-up operations surrounding the deposition of Herod the Great’s son Archelaus, which means it would be in AD 6 or 7 and not therefore before the death of Herod the Great. There is some evidence of a census in 6 BC conducted by Saturninus, the imperial legate in Syria, and it could be that Luke confused the two names – though it is not an obvious mistake to make.

Alongside this, however, Luke’s narrative includes other statements about the date of various important events in the life of Jesus. For example, Jesus is said to have been about thirty years old at his baptism which took place ‘in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar’ (3:1, KJV). Tiberius became ruler of the Roman empire in AD 14, which would make the fifteenth year of his reign AD 28. But this calculation is not as simple as it looks, because Tiberius had shared power with his predecessor Augustus from about AD 11, which means that for all practical purposes he had been the emperor for three years before he received

the title on the death of Augustus. If Luke was reckoning the fifteenth year of Tiberius starting from AD 11, that would make Jesus thirty years old in AD 25–26, which in turn would place his birth in either 5 or 4 BC, and so before the death of Herod the Great.

From time to time, some have tried to introduce a more objective element into this debate, by identifying the bright star mentioned in Matthew 2:2 with a comet, or a conjunction of certain planets that evidently occurred in about 6 BC, or even a supernova.

Information about the star is too speculative to be taken seriously, which means we are left with two significant pieces of evidence indicating a date for Jesus' birth around 4 BC (one from Matthew, the other from Luke), and a third, also provided by Luke, concerning the census under Quirinius which seems not to correlate with this dating. Three possible explanations have been advanced in the effort to solve this conundrum:

Luke has been misunderstood. Several scholars propose that the apparent 'problem' as it has been outlined here simply does not exist. They point out that, from a grammatical point of view, it is perfectly possible to translate Luke 2:2 to read, 'This enrolment was before that made when Quirinius was governor of Syria', in place of the conventional translation, 'This was the first enrolment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.' Linguistically, this understanding is certainly plausible, though it would hardly be the most obvious meaning of the statement, and it does involve an implicit assumption that the text has somehow been corrupted in the process of transmission.

Luke got it wrong. Many more scholars resolve the difficulty by concluding that Luke was mistaken in the information he provides regarding Quirinius. This is perhaps the most obvious explanation to adopt, though it also leaves

some unanswered questions, most notably that elsewhere in his writings whenever Luke refers to Roman officials he displays a high degree of accuracy with regard to their names and titles. Since one of his purposes in writing was to commend the Christian faith to upper-class Roman citizens, it was always going to be especially important for his facts to be correct in relation to the life of the empire. Almost certainly, therefore, Luke believed this information to be correct, and he also presumably thought it was compatible with the other chronological information he gives in relation to the date of Jesus' baptism by John, which presupposes that Jesus was born in the reign of Herod the Great, and therefore something like ten years before the rule of the Quirinius whom Josephus mentions. These considerations do not of course prove that Luke got it right, only that he thought he had checked his sources carefully and did not believe he was giving out contradictory messages.

The story is more complicated than this. A different way of looking at such issues that is valid for other parts of the New Testament as well is to set the information provided by texts like this in a broader context of the realities of life at the furthest extremities of the Roman empire. Ruling Judea from Rome in AD 7 was not the same thing as it would be today, with instant communication from one part of the world to another. Even in ideal conditions, it could take months for a decree signed by the emperor in Rome to be delivered to a distant province like Judea, and there was always a good chance that it might be delayed or even lost in the process. Messengers could be robbed or shipwrecked, or just disappear on the journey. At a later period, for example, Caligula sent orders that his own statue should be erected in the temple at Jerusalem. The local governor was wiser than the emperor, and realized that this would create great resistance from the Jews, so he wrote and asked the emperor to think again. Caligula insisted on his plan going ahead, and wrote back to the governor to tell him so. But the ship carrying his message took three months to make the voyage from Rome to Judea, and in the meantime Caligula was assassinated and a later ship that left Rome bearing the news of his death and the end of his policies arrived twenty-seven days earlier than the first one!

Taking account of such practical problems of communication and government, it is obvious that conducting a census would not be a simple matter and would be unlikely to take place on a single day. One such census in Gaul was met with so much resistance among the people that it took forty years to complete. A census completed by Quirinius in AD 6 or 7 would almost certainly have been in process long before that. The evidence suggests that Quirinius was sent in AD 6 to clear up the mess left by Archelaus's departure, and it is quite possible that he would use information gathered earlier rather than beginning the same tedious process all over again. Augustus was certainly keen on gathering statistics, and there is no reason to think that he did not persuade Herod the Great to carry out a census, as he did with other client kings in the empire. If this was the case, then there is no particular reason to suppose that Luke's information about the census (while still leaving some unanswered questions) is necessarily contradictory to the information that he and other writers supply, all of which suggests that Jesus was born about 6 or 5 BC.

The stories

Questions about the date of Jesus' birth are relatively straightforward when compared with the much larger questions about the stories themselves, which are raised in a particularly pointed way by the assertion in both Matthew and Luke that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:26–27). To be a virgin and pregnant is a contradiction in terms – so how are these stories intended to be understood? We can be sure that the gospel writers knew this well enough, which means that a key question here must relate to the genre or literary form of these narratives. The kind of literature a writer is creating has significant consequences for the way it is presented, so what sort of stories did the gospel writers think they were recording here? In historical narrative, events are generally described in such a way that readers can imagine them having happened, for while the details may be unique and distinctive, history writing depicts things that are similar to those we might expect to experience for ourselves. Poetry is written in a different way, and statements might be made that, if taken literally, are clearly untrue as historical fact. For example, when the English poet William Blake wrote his famous work 'Jerusalem', he described in graphic and realistic detail the miseries of the Industrial Revolution, and then imagined Jesus of Nazareth walking among it all. His readers got the point of the message, and appreciated it so much that his poem later became a classic definition of the self-understanding of the English – even though no one imagines for a moment that, in Blake's words, 'the Son of God' really did place his feet on 'England's green and pleasant land'. Similar examples can be found in cultures all over the world.

So where would the gospel writers have placed their stories about the circumstances of Jesus' birth? Unfortunately, they never tell us, which is why their accounts have engendered so much discussion and the debate inevitably focuses on the virginal conception of Jesus, if only because such a thing is so foreign to human experience. The very notion challenges our basic understandings about what is possible in this world, and highlights in a particularly stark way the role that our own presuppositions inevitably play in the interpretation of New Testament (or indeed any other) texts. Those who

begin by assuming that anything contrary to our own experience of life cannot exist will wish to question, if not reject, the possibility that these birth stories are reporting anything that has a basis in historical fact. They will also have problems with other aspects of the gospels, notably the stories of Jesus' healings, and of course his resurrection from the dead. Following the arguments of scholars like the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, who claimed that there could be no such thing as the miraculous, generations of scholars have sought other ways to re-imagine the apparently supernatural dimensions of the New Testament stories. In so doing, they were inevitably working within the scientific paradigms of their day, which tended to be based on a mechanistic understanding of the cosmos in which everything needed to be understood in a strict relationship of cause and effect. That was long before Einstein's articulation of the principle of relativity, not to mention the development of chaos theory, the uncertainty principle, and other insights which have all made it plausible to imagine that unique events can, and do, happen randomly without any obvious rational explanation. In today's more open atmosphere in which cosmologists speak easily of multiple 'dimensions of reality', and when the notion of the universe as a closed system has been abandoned, people are generally more tolerant of the possibility of events that simply defy logical understanding. In some circles things have swung to the opposite end of the spectrum and whereas a century ago serious thinkers would have found it hard to believe anything beyond our own experience, there is an increasing trend in contemporary culture towards believing absolutely anything of an esoteric or unusual nature, or even to prefer 'fake news' over empirically determined facts.

Neither of these approaches is particularly helpful, and instead of falling back on predetermined positions a more appropriate way to tackle such questions is to keep an open mind about what is possible, while rigorously checking the alleged evidence in seeking to determine what might actually have happened in any given case. In this particular example, a good starting point in relation to Jesus' conception is to ask whether the evidence of the gospels makes good sense within its own frame of reference. This involves examining the evidence on its own merits, scrutinizing its claims and possibilities, and being prepared to listen to its nuances, rather than prejudging its value on the basis of our presuppositions, whatever form they might take. This is not the same thing as claiming we can arrive at some completely 'objective' conclusion, but is an insistence that if we are prepared to weigh up all the possibilities in this way,

recognizing our own starting-points (while being prepared to go beyond them if necessary), then we can at least hope to go some way towards a satisfying appreciation of even the most perplexing issues.

As it happens, the stories of Jesus' virgin conception provide a particularly good example of the sort of concerns that are raised at many points in the New Testament gospels. Even a cursory examination of all the New Testament evidence as it relates to this story will demonstrate that it is not as simple a matter as we might imagine it to be. There are several aspects to be considered:

One of the most surprising things is that apart from those references in the birth stories contained in Matthew and Luke there is no unambiguous statement anywhere else in the New Testament regarding the circumstances of Jesus' conception and birth. It never features in the accounts of the teaching of the first disciples in the book of Acts, Paul never mentions it, nor is it found in the Gospels of Mark and John (neither of which mentions Jesus' birth at all). It therefore seems certain that it was possible for the earliest Christians to have a complete understanding of the Christian faith without any mention of the circumstances of Jesus' birth, and quite possibly without any knowledge of it. Later Christians have often argued that the virginal conception of Jesus was necessary in order for him to have been both divine and human, but the New Testament writers certainly believed all that without ever basing their arguments on the particular way that Jesus was conceived.

This can be regarded as a strong argument for doubting that the stories in Matthew and Luke were intended to be understood factually, though it is a double-edged argument. Since the idea of a virgin birth was not essential for a complete understanding of the precise nature of Jesus' person, why would Matthew and Luke wish to invent it? This is an especially good question given that neither of them makes any particular belief claims on the basis of their birth narratives: they simply present them as statements about the way Jesus was born.

In certain passages of the gospels, Jesus is referred to as ‘the son of Joseph’ (Luke 4:22; John 1:45; 6:42), and the lists in both Matthew (1:2–16) and Luke (3:23–38) trace his ancestry through Joseph. It is therefore sometimes suggested that even within the gospels themselves there is no consistency, and Matthew and Luke have included these stories without noticing any incompatibility with other statements made in their own narratives. For how could Joseph be Jesus’ father if Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived? It is worth noting this, but it is not to be regarded as relevant to the issue of Jesus’ conception. When Joseph married Mary he would be, in the eyes of both public opinion and of the Jewish law, the legal father of Jesus. Besides, there is no word for step-father in either Hebrew or Greek, and so the gospel writers were probably just recording the common description of Jesus as ‘son of Joseph’. Luke certainly thought this was what he was doing (3:23).

The notion of Jesus’ conception by a virgin has sometimes been traced back to Greek or oriental stories about the gods having sex with human women and producing children. This notion is not taken so seriously today as it would have been two or three generations ago, not least because the stories of the gospels obviously move in a very different literary atmosphere from the stories told of the Greek gods. In addition, Luke’s birth stories as a whole have a distinctive style when compared with the rest of his writings. Though some scholars believe this to be a deliberate device used by Luke in imitation of the style of the Septuagint, others have argued that Luke’s Greek is of a sufficiently consistent character to suggest that he is here quoting or depending on an Aramaic source. If that is true, it would imply that he was incorporating traditional stories of Jesus’ birth that came to him from the very earliest group of Christians in Palestine itself, who were the only Christians ever to speak Aramaic.

Matthew’s account raises a different set of questions. By way of commenting on his story he quotes from the Old Testament: ‘All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel”…’ (1:22–23, RSV). Significantly, this passage from Isaiah 7:14 has a different meaning in the Septuagint (from which

Matthew quotes) than it had in the text of the Hebrew Bible. Whereas the Greek version quite specifically uses the term for ‘virgin’, the Hebrew text calls the mother of Emmanuel a ‘young woman’. In the past, it has been suggested that the whole idea of Jesus’ conception by a virgin arose out of this apparent mistranslation of a passage from Isaiah in the Septuagint, though this possibility could apply only to Matthew since Luke neither quotes from nor alludes to anything like this passage in his birth narratives.

Of course, it is almost certainly the case that Matthew used the Greek version instead of the Hebrew text because it was appropriate to his purpose in a way that the Hebrew was not. But this is a common feature of Matthew’s Gospel, which regularly identifies biblical texts as having been fulfilled by Jesus in ways that to modern readers seems irrelevant if not trivial. Since he was writing mainly for Jewish readers, for whom the Hebrew Bible was especially authoritative, it was correspondingly important to show how Jesus was indeed the Messiah promised in its pages. This is nothing like as important for the other gospel writers, whose readers were mainly Gentiles, with neither knowledge of, nor interest in, the Jewish scriptures. It is also possible that it was not the actual author of the Gospel of Matthew who first used this particular version of the text from Isaiah in this context. There is considerable evidence to suggest that at a very early stage of its existence the church began to gather together texts that seemed to predict or foreshadow some aspect of Jesus’ life. Such collections of texts are often referred to as testimonia, and there were probably several different collections in existence not long after Jesus’ death as his followers sought to connect what they had experienced for themselves with what their faith in Judaism had taught them. We know that the concept of a virgin birth (or conception) was quite unacceptable in any form to orthodox Jews, which makes it unlikely that anyone would have gone searching for alleged scriptural references to such a thing unless they had other reasons for supposing it to be an appropriate way to describe Jesus’ conception and birth.

In reflecting on the nature of the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, they also need to be understood in the context of these gospels as a whole, and from that angle it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Matthew and Luke treated them in the same way as the other traditions which were handed down to them, and

which they incorporated in their own accounts. In terms of their genre, then, there is no reason to suppose they were regarded as any different from other narratives about Jesus, which probably places them in the context of Hellenistic popular biography. Some of their most distinctive literary and stylistic characteristics can be understood by placing these particular stories alongside traditional Jewish infancy narratives, such as those attached to Old Testament heroes like Moses, Samuel, and others. The form in which Luke in particular tells the story follows very closely the stories of Samuel's conception and birth (1 Samuel 1–2), and Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) not only parallels Hannah's song of thanksgiving following the birth of her son (1 Samuel 2:1–10) but is full of allusions to many other biblical passages. The literary structure of Matthew's story is also focused on many Old Testament texts, though in a different way, with subtle allusions and references to passages that Matthew saw as having been fulfilled in Jesus. In framing their accounts like this, Matthew and Luke were following in a long tradition of Jewish exposition of the ancient scriptures, known as Midrash – something that came in many different forms, but which was always loosely focused around an interpretative paraphrase of the scriptures. This is probably the most fruitful place to find literary models for what Matthew and Luke were doing, though not forgetting that the scope for wholly fictional elaboration of the stories must have been limited by the fact that they were both writing not more than a couple of generations after the events they purport to describe, at a time when (even in the 80s and 90s) there were still some eyewitnesses alive.

Jesus grows up

Very little is known about Jesus' life as a child. His home was presumably the typical flat-roofed, two-storey house of the time that has already been described in discussing the circumstances of his birth. Joseph probably carried on his business from home, and various statements in the gospels imply that Jesus learned the same trade. Together they would make agricultural tools, furniture, and probably also worked on larger building projects. At the time when Jesus was growing up, the ancient settlement of Sepphoris was being reconstructed as a Hellenistic city only a short distance from Nazareth, and this project must have created a significant demand for the skills of people involved in the construction industry. The city was completed shortly before Jesus began his public ministry of teaching, and it is tempting to imagine that both he and some of his disciples may have been thrown out of regular work at that time. It could also be that Joseph died about this time: he certainly seems to have disappeared from the scene during Jesus' early life and he never features in the later stories of Jesus as an adult. Whenever Jesus' family are mentioned, it is only ever Mary and his brothers and sisters (Matthew 12:46; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19). At his crucifixion, Jesus as the elder son of the family asked one of his senior disciples to take care of his mother Mary – another indication that Joseph was already dead (John 19:26–27).

Events around the time of Jesus and later

➡ 63 BC Roman general Pompey conquers Palestine and enters Jerusalem

➡ 37 BC Herod the Great appointed 'King of the Jews' by Roman senate

➡ 31 BC Antony and Cleopatra defeated by Octavian: Egypt loses its independence to Rome

➡ 5 BC Birth of Jesus

➡ 4 BC Death of Herod the Great

➡ AD 18 Caiaphas made high priest in Jerusalem

➡ AD 26 Jesus begins ministry

➡ AD 26 Pontius Pilate becomes governor of Judea

➡ AD 30 Jesus’ death and resurrection

➡ AD 33 Conversion of Paul

➡ AD 46–48 Paul’s first missionary expedition

➡ AD 49 Claudius expels the Jews from Rome

➡ AD 64 Fire of Rome and Nero’s persecution of Christians

➡ AD 64–66 Deaths of Peter and Paul

➡ AD 66–70 Rising against Romans in Palestine

➡ AD 70 Titus captures and destroys Jerusalem

Nazareth

All the accounts depict Jesus growing up in a very simple home environment. He was considered a suitable person to read the Old Testament in Hebrew in the synagogue at Nazareth, something that not everyone could do (Luke 4:16–20), so he must have had the opportunity to gain some education. In addition to whatever he was taught in a formal context, Nazareth itself must have been the kind of place where everyday life provided its own liberal education. It was not an important place, and is never mentioned in the rest of the Bible or in any other contemporary literature and at one time it was believed that Nazareth did not exist at the time of Jesus. That is now known to be untrue, and various remains of water storage cisterns and other artefacts can be positively dated to this period. But it was never a large place, and even at its most expansive had a population estimated to be no more than about 200 people. Its size alone would ensure that it was never mentioned in most official records, but in addition it was in Galilee, an area that was always despised by the strictest religious people, who felt that the inhabitants of Galilee were too relaxed in their dealings with Gentile culture. Nathanael will not have been the only one to ask, ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’ (John 1:46). It is not coincidental that the two most overtly Hellenistic cities of the day – Sepphoris and Tiberias – were both in this area, which was sometimes referred to as ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ because it had more non-Jews than Jewish residents. It was a great contrast to the southern province of Judea, whose people could more easily isolate their lifestyle from external influences – something that Jesus later criticized them for, claiming that they had too easily become introverted and self-centred, if not self-righteous and hypocritical. But Galilee was criss-crossed by major trading routes between East and West that ensured it would never be isolated from the wider life of the empire. Here Jesus would meet and mix with many people who were not Jewish, and he and his disciples must have been familiar with Greek and Roman ideas as well as the religious heritage of their own people.

The cultural mix of Galilee almost certainly means that Jesus would be familiar with, if not equally fluent in, three languages. Hebrew had been the traditional language of the ancient Jewish nation, and was the language of their scriptures.

It was still used in worship, and would be understood by anyone with a synagogue education, but was no longer spoken. The everyday language was Aramaic, a language that had originally been promoted by the Persian empire in the fifth and sixth centuries BC as its own international language. It had many similarities to Hebrew, which ensured its ready adoption throughout Palestine, and this is the language that Jesus most likely used at home and among his friends. But with such a high proportion of non-Jewish people in Galilee, and with the dominant presence of Sepphoris and Tiberias as centres of Roman governance, it is highly likely that Greek would be familiar to most inhabitants, which means that Jesus would most probably have been familiar with that language as well.

Jesus and his family

Apart from what we can infer from general knowledge of the culture in which Jesus was brought up, the New Testament records very little about his life before he was thirty years old. He was not the only child in his family: Mark 6:3 records how he returned to Nazareth as an adult teacher, and people found it hard to accept his message because they knew him only as ‘the son of Mary, and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon’ – all of whom were still living in the village, along with some unnamed sisters. We know little about these siblings, though they were apparently followers of Jesus in the very earliest days of the church (Acts 1:14), and in spite of not being a disciple during Jesus’ lifetime James subsequently became leader of the church in Jerusalem. Jesus’ mother Mary also features in the book of Acts as one of the leaders of the infant church (Acts 1:14).

The one story about Jesus’ childhood that the gospels do contain demonstrates that his family had a high level of commitment to their ancestral faith. In the course of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem Jesus became separated from his parents, and when they eventually found him he was in the temple, discussing points of belief with the religious experts there (Luke 2:41–52). There is nothing to offer a more precise understanding of the religious affiliations of Jesus’ family, though circumstantial evidence suggests that some may have been Pharisees. James was certainly a conservative person later in life, even as a Christian, and according to the little-known second-century author, Hegesippus, he spent so much time in traditional Jewish prayers that his knees were like a camel’s! As leader of the Jerusalem church he was able to stay in the city long after other Christians – including moderate Jewish believers like Peter – had been forced to quit. He was clearly a person with very traditional sympathies. If some of Jesus’ own relatives were also Pharisees, that could explain why he so often singled them out for special criticism, no doubt based on his first-hand experience of the way their strict ideas had been applied in his own family circle.

The fact that the New Testament contains so little about Jesus’ early life

prompted later writers to produce their own accounts of his childhood. Several such stories survive from the second century and later, with exotic titles like The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, The History of Joseph the Carpenter, and The Childhood Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with The Gospel of Thomas, which is a different kind of document altogether). Most of the stories contained in these ‘gospels’ are concerned with proving that Jesus had miraculous powers even as a child – powers, they claim, that he used to bring embarrassment both to his family and to the religious establishment. There is no reason to suppose that any of these accounts were based on authentic traditions about Jesus as a child: they were compiled in later generations by committed Christian believers who wanted on the one hand to satisfy natural curiosity about Jesus’ origins, and also to enhance his reputation as a wonder-worker (something that, ironically, the New Testament gospels explicitly warn against).

John the Baptist

The next we hear of Jesus is when he was about thirty years old. His cousin, John the Baptist, had started a religious movement and had attracted quite a following. John lived a simple life in the Judean desert, wearing clothes made of camel's hair and eating only the food of the desert, 'locusts and wild honey' (Mark 1:6). John was by no means the only wandering prophet at that time, and many others were talking about the promised Messiah who would come to inaugurate some kind of new society. Further south in the same desert the people of Qumrân were talking about similar things, and even later many rabble-rousers and prophets were able to attract people into the Judean desert in the hope of making a name for themselves and perhaps starting a resistance movement that would drive the Romans out. John, however, never announced himself as a messianic deliverer but claimed only to be 'a messenger', 'a voice' sent from God to bring the good news that the Messiah was about to come (Mark 1:2–3).

Those who were familiar with the Hebrew scriptures knew that such a messenger would be like the old prophet Elijah (Malachi 4:5), and the gospel writers leave us in no doubt that they saw John the Baptist as this very person. Their descriptions of his way of life and of his message are closely modelled on the stories of Elijah in 1 Kings 17–19. The New Testament and Josephus both describe John's work as a call to the people to put their lives in order so that they would be spiritually fit to meet the Messiah who was to establish God's new way of being (Josephus, Antiquities 18.5.2). Earlier prophets had often condemned the people for their disobedience to the standards that God required of them, and declared that though they were still God's people, they could expect only judgment for their failure to live up to these expectations. Indeed, their judgment would be all the more severe because of the spiritual privilege they had enjoyed. John's message was exactly the same. He called on the people to be prepared to change their way of life, and invited those who were willing to face up to that challenge to demonstrate their desire to change by being baptized. The Greek word from which this term is derived means 'to dip', and it was often used, for example, of the dyeing of clothes as they were immersed in a bath or tub. Baptism in the religious sense was just the same, except that it was people who

were immersed, and they were dipped not in dye but in water. In the case of John's baptisms, this took place in the River Jordan.

Most Jews would have been familiar with baptism. At a slightly later date it was the regular rite of admission for Gentiles who wished to embrace the Jewish faith, and may well have carried those overtones at the time of Jesus. The community of Qumrân also underwent baptism on a regular basis as a way of preserving their moral and religious purity, and one of the most conspicuous features of the ruins of their monastery is a complicated system of aqueducts and water tanks that was needed to provide sufficiently large quantities of water in the desert for the members of the community to undergo these baptismal rites. There were some differences, of course, and these rituals were not quite the same as the baptism of converts to Judaism, or of John's baptism, both of which could only happen once as they were not rites of purification but of initiation, signalling the point at which converts declared their intention to change course and commit themselves to a new way of life. The radical nature of John's message, and especially the opposition that he provoked, comes into clear focus when we understand that he was calling people who regarded themselves as already full members of the people of God to undergo a rite that they would have regarded as appropriate only for those who were previously unbelievers. In John's view, even faithful Jewish believers needed some far-reaching change of heart if they were to play their full part in the new society that the Messiah was about to announce. They too would need to begin all over again, just as if they were Gentile people getting to know God for the first time.

Though John understood himself as a forerunner of the Messiah, he had only a partial understanding of what he was announcing. Like others before him, he spoke of the coming of the Messiah in conventional terms of judgment and condemnation, and described the promised deliverer as a person who would chop down fruit trees that gave no fruit and burn the chaff away from the wheat (Luke 3:7–17). Admittedly, he appears to have seen with more clarity of spiritual vision than other religious people of his day, who took it for granted that the objects of God's anger would be the Romans. But he did not fully appreciate the true character of the 'kingdom of God', which in the teaching of Jesus turned out not to be based on damnation and judgment but on more generous qualities such

as love, forgiveness, and an unprejudiced concern for all kinds of people. This had always been the one thing that the ancient nation of Israel had found most difficult to understand, and it continued to cause problems even for Jesus' disciples, who could never quite grasp what it might mean for God's will to be done through self-denying service of others that might even involve suffering on their behalf (Mark 8:31–33). Though it was John who announced the coming of the kingdom of God, the radically different nature of what that entailed only became clear with the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus is baptized

When Jesus came to John and asked to be baptized, John was at first reluctant to allow him to participate in this ritual of repentance. After all, if Jesus really did have the special relationship with God that John believed he did, what could he possibly have to repent of? But Jesus assured John that he must be baptized, telling him that ‘in this way we shall do all that God requires’ (Matthew 3:15). What did Jesus mean by saying this? The simple explanation is that Jesus felt he should identify himself with those who were ready to make sweeping changes in their lifestyles, and who would become his own first disciples. Far from separating him from other people, the gospels suggest that Jesus’ special relationship with God was a powerful reason for becoming completely involved in the lives of the most ordinary folk. There are undoubtedly other undertones in these words, however, for in the context of the entire story of Jesus’ life they link together the beginning and end of the story, implying that Jesus’ baptism was in a sense the first step on the road to the cross, which was the climax of his whole life – a theme that becomes more explicit when his death is later referred to as a ‘baptism’ (Mark 10:38).

John and Qumrân

In view of the similarities between the work of John the Baptist and some of the most distinctive activities of the Qumrân community, it was inevitable that scholars would speculate about some possible connection between them. Two similarities between them are most obviously apparent.

The Judean desert

Luke depicts John the Baptist living in the desert until he began his public work (1:80; 3:2) and since his baptizing took place in the River Jordan it is natural to assume that the desert in question was the Judean desert surrounding the Dead Sea, into which the River Jordan flows, which in turn means he was probably living in the same area as the Qumrân people, and at about the same time. Since their monastery must have been one of the few places where it was possible to survive in such an inhospitable region, it is suggested that John may well have known them, even that he may have been a member of their community.

It is certainly not difficult to believe that John would know of the existence of the community at Qumrân, but some have gone much further by suggesting that he was a member of the group, even that he was brought up by them from an early age. This argument is based on the statement in Luke 1:80 that as a child John ‘grew and developed in body and spirit. He lived in the desert until the day when he appeared publicly to the people of Israel.’ This statement can be placed alongside information from Josephus, who comments that the Essenes often adopted other people’s children in order to indoctrinate them with the ideas of their sect (Jewish Wars 2.8.2). This notion has many attractions, but in the end it creates more problems than it solves.

Though it is certainly the case that he was in the desert reflecting on the nature of his life's work immediately before he began baptizing, the actual words used in Luke 1:80 and 3:2 do not necessarily imply that John spent his childhood in the desert, and the most natural way to read the story about his birth is that he was brought up at home by his parents.

It is also doubtful whether his parents would have allowed a group like the people of Qumrân to adopt their child. Not only were they longing to have this son, but John's father Zechariah was a priest. One of the most distinctive beliefs of the Qumrân sect was that theJerusalem priests were corrupt, and it is difficult to think that John's parents would have given their child to a group who were so hostile to all that they themselves stood for. There is no evidence for other more speculative notions that John was kidnapped by the sect in order to rescue him from his family.

The Judean desert was a big place, and by no means everyone who lived there would need to have been associated with Qumrân. The shores around the Dead Sea are full of caves that provided ideal lodgings for hermits, as they did for the Zealots who continued to resist Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem inAD70. Even Josephus records an episode in which he once joined a hermit called Bannus who was living a solitary life in the desert (Life of Josephus2). The appeal of this kind of life has always been strong to people of a particular disposition, and there must have been plenty of individuals living like this in the desert surrounding the Dead Sea.

Baptism

If it is difficult to make any direct connection between John and the Qumrân community through a shared style of life, it is certainly no easier to do it through their religious rituals. John and the Qumrân people both made use of water in

their religious rites, but they had little in common beyond that. There were in fact several striking differences between John's concept of baptism and the ritual washings that were practised at Qumrân:

The recipients of baptism were different. John baptized people who wanted to change their way of life, while the community at Qumrân accepted only those who could demonstrate that they had already changed their way of life. An initiate often had to wait for a year or two before being allowed to take part in the ritual washings at Qumrân, whereas John was prepared to baptize immediately anyone who was willing to declare their intention to change.

The character of the two rituals was also different. A person baptized by John was baptized only once, and it appears that the rite was not to be repeated whereas the ritual washings at Qumrân were repeated continuously, often on a daily basis. Indeed, 'baptism' in the sense that the word is most usually understood is not really appropriate to describe what went on there. Qumrân 'baptisms' were a means of effecting a ritual purification in the lives of those who were members, rather than being a rite of admission to the group.

The overall significance of the rituals was different. John's baptisms were carried out as part of the preparations for the arrival of the expected Messiah, but the Qumrân washings were not connected with the expectation of a Messiah, or indeed of anyone else. They were more a means of expressing in symbolic form the moral and spiritual purity which the community hoped to preserve among its members.

If John the Baptist ever had been a member of the Qumrân community, he had certainly changed his outlook quite radically by the time he began his public work. But arguments in favour of such a connection are not very strong, and it makes better sense to think of both John and the people of Qumrân as offering different forms of response to the growing political, moral, and spiritual crisis

that was facing their nation at the beginning of the first century.

The gospels depict Jesus' baptism by John as the start of an unfolding revelation of the exact nature of Jesus' relationship to God. According to Mark, on this occasion Jesus heard the words: 'You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you' (Mark 1:11). This is a combination of statements found in two passages in the Hebrew Bible. First is an allusion to Psalm 2:7, 'You are my son; today I have become your father.' In its original context, this statement referred to the kings of ancient Judah, who were regarded as reigning as the personal representatives of God, but by the time of Jesus it was widely understood as a reference to the coming Messiah. In addition, however, there is a clear allusion to the poem of the suffering servant in Isaiah 42:1, where the servant is described as 'the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased.' This concept of 'the servant of God' seems not to have been connected with the expectation of a Messiah before the time of Jesus. The baptism narrative therefore sets out two key themes that inform the rest of the story of Jesus' life. In it, Jesus is reassured of his own special relationship with God as the person who would inaugurate God's kingdom; and he was also reminded that to be this promised deliverer meant something very different from what most people expected. It was to include the acceptance of suffering and service as an essential part of his life, which would be a hard thing to work out in practical terms. But as he faced the challenge, the gospel writers remind their readers that Jesus was supported by God's personal presence, depicted at the baptism as the Holy Spirit symbolically coming to him in the form of a descending dove.

Temptations and priorities

The first three gospels tell how, immediately after he was baptized, Jesus was challenged to get his priorities right as God's promised deliverer, the Messiah. Mark mentions the temptations of Jesus only briefly, but Matthew and Luke both provide more detailed accounts. All three place this period of self-appraisal at the very start of Jesus' public work, as a programmatic statement of his basic aims and objectives. But the issues raised in this story were continually cropping up in his ministry, for each of the temptations was an invitation to minister in a way that would by-pass the suffering and humble service that Jesus ultimately knew to be God's way of doing things.

Money

The first temptation was to bring about the messianic age by economic means, making stones into bread (Luke 4:1–4). There were certainly plenty of hungry people in the world who would have welcomed bread from any source. Indeed, Jesus himself was in the desert and must have been hungry enough at the time. In addition, the ancient scriptures had often depicted the coming new age as a time of considerable material prosperity when the hungry would be fed and everyone's needs would be satisfied (Isaiah 25:6–8; 58:10–11; 65:19–25; Ezekiel 39:17–20). Moreover, later stories describe how Jesus fed the hungry on different occasions, so he was certainly not indifferent to the needs of starving people (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14). There were therefore plenty of good reasons why Jesus should think it appropriate to be concerned with such matters. But he knew that the fame and popularity of an economic miracle-worker was not the same as suffering and service, and to establish a reputation on this basis alone would have been to deny the very essence of what God was calling him to do and be. A word of God to the people of Israel at a crucial moment in their history became the means of overcoming this particular temptation: 'People cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Deuteronomy 8:3, author's translation).

Fame

A similar temptation presented itself with the suggestion that he should throw himself down from one of the towers of the temple into the crowded courtyard below. Had he survived, that would certainly have been a dramatic demonstration to the whole nation that he was indeed endowed with special powers. The miraculous and unusual have universal appeal, and a Jewish audience would have been no different. Paul, who knew Judaism better than most, said it was characteristic of his people to ‘demand signs’ (1 Corinthians 1:22). For Jesus, though, this temptation conveyed a more specific underlying implication, for there was at least one ancient prophecy which seemed to suggest that the Messiah would suddenly appear in the temple, as if from nowhere and in this kind of dramatic way (Malachi 3:1). That, together with a further promise that God would protect those who were ready to put their faith to the test (Psalm 91:9–16), presented a powerful combination of arguments in favour of trying to pull off such a stunt. If Jesus really was God’s chosen one, then should he not confirm his calling by testing these promises to see if God really was on his side? Jesus was not afraid of the dramatic and the miraculous and there are many examples of that in the rest of his life. But he rejected the temptation to base his message purely on such sensationalism, again quoting the ancient scriptures to back up his judgment: ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’ (Deuteronomy 6:16, RSV). The context of Psalm 91 had made it clear that such promises of safety and security would be valid only for those who were prepared to live in obedient service to God’s will – and for Jesus, that was to mean service and suffering, not the arbitrary use of God’s promises for his own selfish ends.

Power

The third temptation was to be a political Messiah. Luke places this one second, but Matthew puts it last, perhaps to emphasize its importance (Matthew 4:8–10). There is no doubt that this must have been the strongest temptation of all, for it was precisely what most people at the time were hoping that the Messiah would be. There was also a widespread belief among the people that when the new age arrived they would rule over all the other nations, which no doubt explains the terms in which this temptation is presented to Jesus as an invitation to accept the authority of 'Satan' (a word that means 'tempter') so as to gain power over the whole world. The prospect was made even more vivid by a vision of the splendour of the world's kingdoms. But Jesus realized again that this was far different from the sort of new society that he was to inaugurate. It was not that Jesus was unsympathetic to the deeply felt desire of his people for freedom: he had himself lived under the tyranny of Rome and had worked with his own hands to produce enough to pay Roman taxes. He was well aware of what was going on and was not indifferent to the miserable condition of his people.

But he rejected an exclusively political messiahship for two reasons. Firstly, he rejected the terms on which it was being offered to him. According to the gospel narratives Satan offered to share sovereignty with Jesus, which meant he would be given limited political authority just so long as he acknowledged that God's sovereignty was less than absolute. That was something Jesus could not accept. His own commitment, and the commitment that he later demanded of his followers, was exclusively to God. To acknowledge the tempter's power in any area of life would have been a denial of God's ultimate authority.

In addition, Jesus was offered the possibility of ruling by the 'authority' and 'glory' of an empire like that of the Romans. He knew that the nature of God's kingdom was to be quite different from the authority of an empire like the Romans had. God's values and standards could never be imposed from outside, but would be nourished most effectively as people were set free to make their own free choices not only about their relationship to God but also about how

they could best create the new kind of social structures that would most closely reflect God's way of doing things. It was not too difficult to reject this third temptation, and Jesus did so decisively. He would not try to impose a new authoritarianism on the world to replace the old authoritarianism of Rome and the other empires that had preceded it. The 'kingdom of God' would not be the rule of tyranny and cruelty that many religious fanatics were hoping for, but something that would spring from the renewed inner nature of those who were a part of it, as they discovered God in fresh ways and found themselves empowered to be the kind of people who would carry forward this new vision of a world transformed through the power of love and caring service.

CHAPTER 4

THE MESSAGE

After he met John and was baptized, most of Jesus' life was spent as a spiritual teacher. It was a common practice for such individuals to adopt an itinerant lifestyle, wandering from place to place accompanied by their disciples, and this is the style that Jesus followed. He had his disciples, and the term 'Rabbi' or 'Teacher' was regularly applied to him (John 1:38; 3:2; 9:2). Though he spoke in the synagogue where the faithful met for worship each sabbath (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16; 6:6), that was not his major sphere of operation. Rather than expecting people to come to him, he reached out to people wherever they could be found (Mark 1:16–20), calling his first disciples from their fishing boats, and regularly teaching out in the open countryside where large crowds gathered to meet him. His reputation soon spread as his hearers recognized that this was no ordinary rabbi, not least because he was not just someone else's disciple passing on what he had heard from others, but was bringing his own distinctive message about people and their relationship with God. He not only had a captivating message, but he presented it in such a way that it was impossible to avoid making a decision about him. All four gospels document the rapid emergence of strident opinions about him, with a majority of the people acknowledging that 'he taught them as one who had authority' (Matthew 7:29, RSV), while many traditional religious experts – not to mention the nation's political leaders – dismissed him as an impostor and a cheat.

The kingdom of God

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke the major theme of Jesus' teaching is described as 'the kingdom of God'. The fourth gospel, John, hardly uses that term at all (only four times in the entire gospel). There, the preferred term is 'eternal life' – a way of contextualizing the core of Jesus' teaching in a way that would have greater appeal to the original intended readership of that gospel. The notion of a kingdom would be familiar enough to Jesus' contemporaries in first century Galilee. One way or another, it had been a central part of Jewish religious aspirations for generations as the nation had survived – and suffered – domination by one foreign power after another. At the time of Jesus, Rome happened to have the upper hand, but the dream of independence was by no means dead and the possibility of a new destiny was a constant topic of civic discourse. To those who took seriously the teaching of the Hebrew scriptures, this was a religious as well as a political question: how could the nation be restored to the sort of international prominence that their forebears had been promised, and who would be the divinely appointed instrument through whom the hated Romans might be driven out of their land so that the people could enjoy the sort of peaceful self-determination described by their ancient prophets?

Put simply, Jesus insisted that this was the wrong question. Though empires from time immemorial have gone to war in order to establish peace, his message challenged that deeply held assumption. It might look as if the Roman and Greek conquests had brought peace to the world (and they had indeed produced a cohesion that previously was lacking). But Jesus regarded that as a phoney peace, because it was not peace with justice, and it was based on the mistaken belief that power to change things was in limited supply (and therefore if one side had it, the other did not). For him, the only true source of justice was God, and peace was offered to the world as a gift to be embraced by those who were prepared to change not just their behaviour but their entire worldview. It is no wonder that he eventually found himself opposed by both Jews and Romans, because he denied the very basis on which they related to each other. A Jewish kingdom established through military might would be no more stable or satisfying than a Roman one: it would just exchange one form of oppressive

control for another.

What Jesus said and what people thought they heard were not often the same, and when he emerged as a wandering prophet after his baptism and temptations and declared that ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand’ (Mark 1:15, KJV) his hearers assumed that such a ‘kingdom’ could mean only one thing: the imminent arrival of a military power inspired by God that would finally crush the existing empire of Rome. This vision was at the heart of the popular messianic expectation, and they fully expected that they, the Jewish people, would have a prominent part in this coming kingdom under the leadership of their long-awaited deliverer, the Messiah. The terminology of kingship was deeply rooted in the national consciousness, for from the very beginning of Israelite history God had regularly been described as ‘king’ of the people (Psalms 96:10; 99:1; 146:10). Because God had made it, the whole world belonged to God, and the nation of Israel likewise because God had rescued its ancestors from slavery in Egypt and led them to a new land. In a cultural environment where leaders of nations were generally described as ‘kings’ it was natural to think of God in that way, but almost from the start there had been some tension between this notion and the political reality. When ancient Israel first appointed a man (Saul) as king, some opposed the move on the grounds that it undermined the position of God as the nation’s guardian (1 Samuel 8:1–18). Later on, David became king in Jerusalem and the two ideas were united: David and his successors were recognized as the rightful rulers of the nation because God had chosen them (2 Samuel 7:1–17). Their duty was to do God’s will, so that the kingdom would reflect the standards of God’s law. In reality, things were never that simple. Kings like to exercise their own power and it was only a matter of time before the religious fiction that the king was appointed by God disappeared under the pressure of political expediency. Yet the hope for something better never quite vanished entirely, but was transformed into a future aspiration, that God would step in to correct things and establish a kingdom of true justice as a vehicle to fulfil the ancient promises. The prophet Zechariah was only one of many who fervently looked for that time to come, a day on which ‘the Lord will become king over all the earth’ (Zechariah 14:9, NRSV), and by the time of Jesus there was a widespread expectation that the arrival of the Messiah would herald the coming of this kingdom.

What then did Jesus mean in speaking of ‘the kingdom of God’? His hearers can hardly be blamed for thinking that he was announcing the establishment of a new state, because that was probably the only context in which they had ever come across the term. But that is so obviously contrary to what Jesus taught about it that he must have been using the phrase in some other way. By his words and his actions he distanced himself from the Zealots who were seeking to drive the Romans out of their land, though that reality has not prevented subsequent generations of Christians from supposing that his teaching concerned the establishment of a political entity. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) identified the kingdom of which Jesus spoke with the organized structures of the church, and throughout the days of Christendom church leaders regarded themselves as legitimate successors to the Roman empire with a political mandate to expand their own domain – a belief that motivated European exploration of other parts of the world and played its part in the emergence of colonialism. There are still Christians who think of ‘the kingdom of God’ as just another word for ‘church’, while many more regard it as some sort of political manifesto. The problem with all these notions is that they take what was a meaningful metaphor in the context of ancient imperial culture, and apply it literally in ways that detract from Jesus’ original intention. He was actually using familiar terminology in order to undermine and redefine its accepted meaning. In particular, he rejected the conventional notion that peace can be achieved through violence, and declared that God’s way is different and stems from God’s own character which is characterized by love, justice, and generosity. A good definition of ‘the kingdom of God’ is therefore to think of it as ‘God’s way of doing things’ – a way that is explained and illustrated not only through his teaching but was also exemplified in his lifestyle. Naturally, as Jesus explains what that looks like in relation to everyday life situations, he does offer insights into how discipleship might impact politics, or economics, or other social realities. But these everyday concerns do not exhaust the meaning of God’s ‘kingdom’, which is both wider and deeper than that: wider because it is a way of being that was to be applied to the whole of life, both private and public, and deeper because it would address not only material but also spiritual realities, giving those who committed themselves to it a fresh understanding of true freedom and justice, and the renewed experience of God’s presence in their lives.

A new way of being

For those with the discernment to see it, there was a clue pointing in this direction in the actual words that Jesus most probably used to speak about this ‘kingdom of God’. Aramaic was the language that a majority of people in Palestine used in everyday conversations, though the Gospels (like the rest of the New Testament) were written in Greek which means there is no direct record of the Aramaic words used by Jesus. But even the Greek word that is conventionally translated into English as ‘kingdom’ (basileia) often indicates not just territory over which a king ruled, but also the style in which he did so. Most scholars think that the Aramaic word that Jesus himself will have used was malkutha, which certainly had that meaning. Indeed, there are examples in Jewish literature that refer to believers committing themselves to the malkuth YHWH, which meant accepting God’s standards and seeking to live one’s life in accordance with them. Even on a linguistic basis, then, a better translation might be, not ‘the kingdom of God’, but ‘the kingship of God’, referring to the way that God operates, and the example that God sets to others. This helps to explain why Jesus was concerned more than anything else about the quality of human life, and the nature of meaningful relationships, rejecting attitudes of power and control in favour of love, acceptance, and mutual service. For him, these qualities were to characterize the life of his disciples because they were qualities that were central to the being of God.

This certainly helps to explain some of the more apparently obscure things that Jesus said. He could tell the Pharisees that ‘The kingdom of God does not come in a way that can be seen… because the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:20–21, author’s translation), and his disciples that ‘Anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a child cannot enter it’ (Mark 10:15, author’s translation). There is no sense in which a physical territory could be ‘within’ a person – but Jesus was saying that from the moment God is recognized as sovereign in someone’s life, then God’s style of being is lived out in the world. He could say that this revolutionary new way of living was already ‘among’ his hearers, because he himself was there, and he was totally committed to exploring and putting into practice God’s values and standards. In a similar way, Jesus

compared ‘entering the kingdom’ with ‘entering into life’ (Mark 9:43–47). Those who ‘inherit the kingdom’ also ‘inherit eternal life’ (Matthew 25:34–36), and the gate leading to the kingdom is ‘the way that leads to life’ (Mark 10:17–23) – a combination of ‘life’ and ‘kingdom’ that bridges the gap between the dominant motif of the first three gospels and the emphasis on ‘eternal life’ in John. In the same way, Paul reminded his readers in Corinth that ‘the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power’ (1 Corinthians 4:20, RSV) – empowerment from God that enables those who wish to change to live in ways that will truly reflect God’s style of doing things.

Because this way of being offers such transformative potential, it was natural that the ideal future would also be depicted in these terms. There are many statements in the gospels which show that Jesus regarded the kingdom of God not only as the inward rule of God in the lives of his followers but also as some kind of tangible future reality. He spoke of people who would ‘come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God’ (Luke 13:29, author’s translation), and at the Last Supper he told the disciples: ‘From now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes’ (Luke 22:18, NRSV). Matthew records him saying that his followers would ‘inherit the kingdom prepared… from the foundation of the world’ (25:34, NRSV).

Jesus clearly understood God’s ‘kingdom’ in at least two ways: on the one hand, as God’s guidance in the lives of those who would be disciples, and on the other hand as something that would eventually bring transformation to the whole of human society. Both these concepts were already found in the expectations of the Old Testament writers, and in the time of Jesus some rabbis taught that God’s kingship over Israel was already in place, even under Roman rule, and that it operated through the Torah, or Law. There had always been a tension between those who expected God’s sovereignty to be displayed in the form of an organized kingdom that would replace the empires of the world and those who regarded it as a process that operated on entirely different moral principles. Jesus’ own followers struggled to understand this: when they wanted to hail him as an imperial figure after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:15), and when James and John tried to claim the chief places on either side of Jesus’

throne they also were obviously thinking in crudely political terms (Mark 10:35–45). Jesus consistently resisted such temptations, but he never denied that God's alternative style of doing things would ultimately transform the world. He sometimes described the transformation in relatively undramatic ways, comparable to the way a mustard seed quietly grows into a large tree or the way yeast makes bread rise (Matthew 13:31–33). But he was also quite convinced that God would act decisively and directly, not just in the lives of individuals but also in the public affairs of nations and empires (Mark 13).

This tension between what God can accomplish now in the lives of those who are prepared to order their lives according to the new values and the ultimate transformation of society that is yet in the future is found elsewhere in the New Testament, so that there is a constant balancing act between the present and the future. Paul can say that 'the kingdom of God is not concerned with material things like food and drink, but with goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Romans 14:17, author's translation), thereby linking it inseparably with moral choices and personal spirituality. But elsewhere he makes a natural connection between this notion of God's kingdom and the future state of the world: 'The end comes when Jesus delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every other rule and authority and power' (1 Corinthians 15:24, author's translation) – something that became explicit in the book of Revelation, where 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever' (Revelation 11:15, author's translation). Unlike the wider Hellenistic culture, though, the early Christians envisaged this fulfilment of human destiny taking place on this earth rather than in some other sphere of 'heaven' to which disembodied souls would migrate on death. The tension between this world and other worlds is also one that can be traced throughout the New Testament, most especially in the writings of Paul, many of which were addressed to readers who held a dualistic view that could never imagine the human world being touched and transformed by the divine.

An eschatological kingdom

Thinking about the different meanings attached to ‘the kingdom of God’ is a good point at which to introduce some consideration of a widely used technical term: ‘eschatology’. The word itself derives from two Greek words (eschaton and logos), and literally means ‘ideas about the end’. But because Jesus never talks about the future without it also being firmly rooted in the here-and-now, the term has come to be used in a much broader way to describe the many different forms in which God’s ways of doing things can make itself felt, whether in the lives of individual people, or in society, or in the ultimate meaning of the entire cosmic process. Over the last century or so, discussion of this topic has been dominated by three distinct perspectives, which not only cast light on some aspects of New Testament teaching but also serve as a case study to demonstrate how the cultural circumstances in which we operate influence our understanding of what we find in the gospels.

Futurist eschatology

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was a German musician and theologian who is probably best known as a medical missionary in Africa, though in the early days of his career he did a great deal to promote the idea that Jesus was obsessed with what he called ‘futurist eschatology’. By that, he meant that Jesus held roughly the same expectations as the apocalyptic writers of his day, and that he believed God was about to intervene immediately and dramatically in the affairs of humanity, and his own life’s work was to be the decisive climax of history. By definition, therefore, that climax would have to come within Jesus’ own lifetime. On the basis of this perception, Schweitzer suggested that when Jesus declared that ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’, he really expected the cataclysmic end of the world to come almost immediately. More than that, Jesus also imagined himself to be ‘the Messiah designate’ who would assume a position of full authority once the kingdom had actually arrived. Like many other visionaries both before and after him, Jesus found the reality of life rather different from these idealistic dreams, and as life went on very much as before it began to seem

as if the dream had been only an illusion.

Schweitzer suggested that at the start of his ministry Jesus confidently announced the imminent arrival of the 'Son of Man' to usher in this new age (Matthew 10:23) but when that failed to materialize he decided to try to force God's hand by going to Jerusalem and pressing his claims with the authorities there, and it was this move that resulted in him being arrested, tried, and tragically sentenced to death. However, even this astonishing display of blind faith did not produce the desired result, but ended with defeat and a cry of despair from the cross as Jesus realized that God was not going to be blackmailed and had actually abandoned him (Mark 15:34). None of this was a problem for Schweitzer, and he claimed that an even greater power resulted from this incredible act of misplaced confidence than would have been the case if the literal kingdom had actually arrived – because the example set by Jesus was still able to exert a powerful influence on any who are willing to be obedient. Schweitzer himself certainly put into practice the lessons he saw there, though ironically his overall perspective on Jesus prevented him from taking his actual teaching too seriously, for he regarded even the Sermon on the Mount as an 'interim ethic', valid only for the very short period of Jesus' own ministry. Instead, he attached the greatest importance to Jesus' faithfulness to his convictions, even when those convictions were so evidently mistaken.

Schweitzer's views were published in German in 1906, and then subsequently expanded and revised in 1913, and an English translation of the 1906 edition appeared as The Quest of the Historical Jesus. It is still an impressive work, not least because of its survey of scholarly debate in the decades preceding its publication. It was also one of the first books to direct attention to the apocalyptic expressions of popular spirituality as the context in which Jesus' teaching would originally have been heard. Schweitzer also correctly argued that Jesus' message could not properly be understood apart from the story of his life and death. In arguing this way, he focused on statements such as Jesus' words to his disciples on the occasion of his transfiguration, that 'Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power' (Mark 9:1, author's translation), and because of his assumption that the kingdom was a physical entity he was able to conclude that Jesus was mistaken, because it

never happened that way. By combining the dreams of the apocalyptists with the ideology of the Zealots and prioritizing these over other elements within Jewish theology, he ended up taking account of only a part of the total evidence and ignoring the fact that the New Testament writers unanimously believed that the possibility of a new way of being was actually made available to all humankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers.

It is instructive to look back on this with the benefit of hindsight, and reflect on the way that Schweitzer's opinions were being formed by the events of his own day. Less than fifty years previously, Charles Darwin had promulgated his theory of evolution, which had hardly been taken seriously by the biologists of the day but was eagerly seized upon by philosophers who saw that if humans were at the top of the evolutionary tree, that offered unique opportunities for us to reshape and 'civilize' the world. The success of several European empires seemed to bear that out, and it looked as if there was nothing that inspired individuals would not be able to accomplish. Viewed in this light, Jesus had been a man before his time, mistakenly thinking that he could achieve what only now seemed possible to the constantly evolving and improving nations of Europe. In reality, they were committed to the very fallacy that Jesus had so eloquently dismissed – the notion that peace can be established through violence – and if his influence was to be acknowledged at all it was inevitable that it would be reduced to a vague disembodied message that would not challenge the political and intellectual status quo.

Realized eschatology

The exact opposite of Schweitzer's theory was promoted by the English scholar C. H. Dodd (1884–1973). Writing in the 1930s, he proposed that far from looking for some military cataclysm that would change the world and usher in a reign of peace, Jesus was really saying that the 'kingdom' had already arrived in his own person. The influence of this new way of living may need to grow and develop, but the ultimate and decisive act had already taken place. It is easy to

see why this view would have been more attractive to a generation that had survived the horrors of World War I, and were starting to question whether the human race really was as advanced as had been supposed. The cataclysmic changes brought about by that conflict had not solved anything, and had certainly not led to the sort of golden age that its protagonists had anticipated. Violence – whether apocalyptic or contemporary – had solved nothing and the challenge of making the world a better place was still there. Academics like Dodd were disposed to think that such a transformation was more likely to happen through a process of moral improvement and education rather than through supposedly redemptive violence.

At the time, the idea that Jesus identified his own life and work as the coming of God's kingdom was a new one, which gained added plausibility because it shed new light on some aspects of the gospel narratives. The miracles, for example, are easier to understand when they are viewed as signs and demonstrations that God was at work in bringing the kingdom to birth through the life of Jesus than they would be on the older view that had regarded them as 'proofs' of Jesus' divine nature. But regarding Jesus' message as having been entirely 'realized' within his own lifetime fails to account for all the evidence.

Some passages in the gospels are not consistent with a 'realized eschatology'. The Son of Man is said to be coming 'with the clouds of heaven', implying some sort of cosmic consequence, and there are also parables that certainly use language that assumes a future winding-up and consummation of things (Matthew 25:1–13, 31–46). Dodd understood these not as literal images of a future state, but as symbols pointing to existential choices that confront anyone who encounters Jesus' message about God's kingdom. There is certainly evidence that Jesus regarded the declaration of his message as in some sense a judgment on those who heard it and did not respond (Mark 3:28–30; Matthew 23; John 3:18–19), but when taken as a whole it is clear that Jesus did actually believe that the way of being he was advocating would, in the end, go well beyond the inner lives of disciples and would change the world.

This dual focus on present and future can also be traced elsewhere in the New Testament. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul addresses Christians who had become obsessive about the future, and though he clearly did not share their passion for such speculation, he affirms the underlying conviction that the way of Jesus would ultimately transform the whole of society (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12). In Corinth, on the other hand, Paul addressed people with an opposite obsession, who were convinced that conventional descriptions of the divine future were to be taken as metaphors for their own spiritual experience – and to them he again emphasized his own belief that Jesus would return in the future (1 Corinthians 15:3–57). If Dodd's understanding was the whole story, and Jesus taught only that the kingdom had already arrived in its final form, then it is hard to see how and why the first Christians should have forgotten this emphasis so soon and turned instead to speculations about possible futures. But given the circumstances in which he was writing, it is not hard to appreciate why Dodd should have made that emphasis.

Inaugurated eschatology

Taking note of the problems associated with these polarized understandings of Jesus' message, the consensus among scholars today is that they both contain elements of truth. Jesus was indeed claiming (as Dodd believed) that a new age had dawned with his own ministry, but at the same time he regarded its complete outworking as still in the future. Hence the expression 'inaugurated eschatology'. If, as has been suggested here, 'the kingdom of God' is a way of speaking about 'God's way of doing things', then there is no intrinsic difficulty in bringing these apparently diverse understandings into dynamic relationship with each other: they are simply different aspects of the same divine will.

This rather complex subject can be summarized as follows:

Jesus certainly contextualized his message within the language of popular

spirituality, which to a large extent was taken from the speculation of apocalyptic dreamers and storytellers. He may also have shared some aspects of their views, especially the expectation that the full arrival of the kingdom would usher in a new age of peace through justice. But for Jesus, eschatological hope was not hope in the future, but hope in God – the God who, as far back as the time of Moses, had been revealed as one whose being embraces past, present, and future (Exodus 3:13–15).

Jesus taught that the fundamental nature of the kingdom of God was being revealed in his own life and work. It is clear that this proved to be very different from what most of his listeners had expected, for the kingdom was revealed not as a tyrannical political force that would seize power from Rome by adopting its own tactics of violent revolution, but as a loving community of those whose only allegiance was to God, living by values that were quite different from the norms of conventional society.

God's direct intervention is to be seen not only in the life and teaching of Jesus, but also in his death, resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers. It may well be that it was in these events that some of Jesus' own expectations about the last things were fulfilled – for example, the statement that some of his disciples would see the kingdom coming with power before they died (Mark 9:1).

Since there is so much variety in the language used to describe the kingdom, its full understanding also requires a similarly broad and comprehensive interpretative framework. The kingdom can arrive secretly, like the yeast working in the dough (Matthew 13:33); or it can come by the sudden appearance of Christ in glory as at the expected second coming (Mark 13).

‘Kingdom of God’ or ‘Kingdom of heaven’?

The Gospel of Matthew consistently uses the term ‘kingdom of heaven’, except for Matthew 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, and 21:43, where we find the term ‘kingdom of God’ that Mark and Luke use everywhere. It has occasionally been suggested that these different expressions represent two distinct phases in Jesus’ teaching, but there can be no doubt that they both refer to the same thing. This can be demonstrated quite easily by comparing the same statements in Matthew and in the other gospels. For example, when Mark summarizes Jesus’ message as ‘the kingdom of God is at hand; repent…’ (Mark 1:15, RSV), Matthew has, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 4:17, RSV). There are many other similar examples.

The most obvious explanation of this diversity is the likelihood that Matthew was writing for Jewish readers, whereas Mark and Luke were both writing for a predominantly Gentile readership. Faithful Jewish believers knew of the commandment that warned ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain…’ (Exodus 20:7, RSV) and rather than risk doing that, it was easier to avoid using the name of God at all. Various alternatives were adopted, and ‘heaven’ was one of them. To avoid offending such readers, Matthew speaks of ‘the kingdom of heaven’ whereas Mark and Luke (writing for people with no such scruples) use the term ‘kingdom of God’, which was almost certainly the way Jesus himself spoke. There are two main reasons for thinking this was the original form:

In general, Jesus was not afraid of upsetting religious conventions, and he never showed any reticence in speaking about God. His openness in this regard was one of the accusations brought against him at his trials. Not only did he claim to know God in a direct personal way, he even dared to place relationships with God in the intimate context of family imagery, thinking of himself as a child and

God as a parent.

The four instances where Matthew uses ‘kingdom of God’ can more easily be understood if we suppose that Matthew overlooked these four occurrences of the word, but it is really impossible to think that in just these four cases he changed an original ‘kingdom of heaven’ into ‘kingdom of God’ for the benefit of his Jewish readers.

Who did Jesus think he was?

According to the gospels, there were two topics in Jesus' teaching that engendered misunderstanding and controversy among his hearers. One was his understanding of God's kingdom, which challenged the deeply entrenched view that peace could be achieved through violence, and the other was what he seems to have believed about his own role in the promotion of an alternative way of being. Jesus never claimed overtly to be the Messiah of ancient prophecy, though that is a clearly intended implication of the way the gospel writers describe him, and in that they simply reflect the widely held opinion of his disciples right from the start. Less than ten years after the crucifixion, groups of his followers were establishing themselves in the major cities of the Roman empire, where they became known as 'Christians' – a name that derives from the Greek word 'Christ' (christos), which then came to be used as a second name for Jesus, and which is the equivalent of the Hebrew 'Messiah'. It is therefore surprising how infrequently that terminology is used in the gospels themselves. Mark was probably the first one to be written, and the word for 'Messiah' or 'Christ' occurs only seven times, one of which is in the title of the gospel (1:1), while only three of the other six could be taken to refer to Jesus (8:29; 9:41; 14:61–62). Just one of these (14:61–62) depicts Jesus making a direct personal claim to be the Messiah, and even then Mark immediately redefines it by reference to a different term, 'the Son of Man'.

The Son of Man

So who was the Son of Man? This expression is used fourteen times in Mark's Gospel, though in the longer account of Matthew it occurs no less than thirty-one times. It is used more than any other term to describe Jesus and his work, and occurs only in sayings attributed to Jesus himself (with just one clear example of others using it of him, in John 12:34, where his listeners are requesting clarification of his own use of it). Moreover, it is only found once outside the gospels (Acts 7:56), so the unambiguous testimony of the entire New Testament is that this is a term that Jesus used for himself, and one that was never widely used of him either by his contemporaries or by later generations of his followers. So what did it mean? Was it just a way of emphasizing Jesus' solidarity with humanity – that he was a typical person, with whom everyone could identify? That would be consistent with statements made elsewhere: Paul, for instance, compares Jesus with Adam, the archetypal ancestor of the entire human race, and as such the forerunner and exemplar of all those who would truly live by the values of God's law (Romans 5:12–21). At the same time, however, the early Christians also believed that Jesus was more than human, and that cosmic dimension of his significance is reflected in other sayings where the Son of Man is described as 'coming in the clouds with great power and glory' (Mark 13:26), or 'seated at the right hand of the power of God' (Luke 22:69, NRSV).

The term 'Son of Man' has been the subject of much scholarly speculation and what can be said here is only the barest summary of the discussion. Everyone is agreed on the key question: What would come into the minds of those people who actually knew Jesus when they heard the expression 'Son of Man'? Since they were all Jews, it is natural to look to the Jewish religious tradition for an answer and the Hebrew Bible typically uses 'Son of Man' in two ways. It most often means human beings as differentiated from God, usually to contrast the weakness and poverty of ordinary mortals with God's transcendence (Numbers 23:19; Job 25:6; Psalm 8:4; 146:3; Isaiah 51:12). Prophets could on occasion be addressed by God as 'son of man', and this was a means of emphasizing the difference between them and the ultimate source of their message (Ezekiel 2:1; Daniel 8:17). But the term appears with a more distinctive meaning in Daniel

7:13–14 where ‘one like a son of man… came to the Ancient of Days and… was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him’ (RSV). Moreover, this ‘dominion’ is ‘everlasting… shall not pass away’ and the ‘kingdom… shall not be destroyed.’ The book of Daniel was an apocalyptic work, which explains the imagery used, and similar characterizations of the ‘Son of Man’ are found in other apocalyptic writings that may have been known at the time of Jesus. The Similitudes of Enoch describe the ‘Son of Man’ as a supernatural figure sent from God as the future judge of humanity (1 Enoch 37–71), while the reference to an individual more cryptically described as ‘the Man’ in 2 Esdras 13 may also have been intended to carry the same connotation. However, there is no certainty that either of these books was actually in existence at the time of Jesus, and they are only known through relatively late texts that may in any case have been subject to later additions and amendments, possibly under Christian influence. It is certainly not possible to use them with any confidence to show, for example, that the term ‘Son of Man’ would have been a widely recognized title of any sort in the time of Jesus.

It has also been claimed that in Aramaic the phrase ‘son of man’ would either convey nothing sensible at all, or would at best be a generic reference to people in general (like the English term ‘humankind’), rather than a specific way of describing a particular individual. This consideration is complicated by the fact that, though Jesus would have used an Aramaic term, the gospels were all written in Greek and, while they do occasionally preserve the actual Aramaic words used by Jesus, they never do so in this case, though scholars generally assume that the Aramaic phrase would have been barnasha.

There are, then, three key factors to be taken into account in trying to decide the significance of the term ‘Son of Man’ as used by Jesus:

The actual Aramaic words ‘son of man’ may well have had no specific meaning, but were possibly just a circuitous way of saying something like ‘human being’.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the term ‘son of man’ had been used to describe human beings and their difference from God.

In the book of Daniel and other apocalypses, the ‘son of man’ appears as a transcendent, heavenly figure both representing and standing in the place of God.

One way or another, all these nuances are relevant. If the term ‘Son of Man’ had no clearly definable meaning in Aramaic, then it could easily have been used for that very reason: with no ready-made significance, Jesus would have been free to make it mean exactly what he wanted it to mean. If the term ‘Messiah’ had featured in his teaching, it would have been far more difficult for him to explain precisely what he understood his role to be, since people had so many preconceived ideas of what the Messiah was supposed to do and say, and in spite of its ambiguity ‘Son of Man’ at least avoided that particular problem. At the same time, for those with the perception to see it, the background of the term in the Jewish scriptures and other religious writings did provide some clues to the things Jesus wanted to say about himself. For it seems that he did want to claim both that he was an ordinary human being, and that in some way not clearly defined he was specially sent from God – and these are both concepts that could be found in the traditional use of the ‘Son of Man’. In the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus is shown using the name ‘Son of Man’ in four distinct ways.

In some places ‘Son of Man’ appears as the equivalent of the personal pronoun ‘I’, as a way of describing Jesus’ ordinary human existence. Certainly that is how the gospel writers understood it, for in places where different gospels have the same sayings, one can use ‘Son of Man’ where another uses the pronoun ‘I’ (compare Mark 10:45 and Luke 22:27; or Matthew 16:13 and Mark 8:27; or Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30).

In other places, ‘Son of Man’ is used to emphasize Jesus’ authority to speak in the name of God – as, for example, when he claims to forgive sins (Mark 2:10) or assumes the right to set aside the traditional sabbath commandments (Mark 2:28).

At other times, ‘Son of Man’ has reference to a future coming on the clouds of heaven and alongside God where he then plays a key role in dispensing justice. This is the same as in Daniel 7, and features particularly in Matthew (e.g. 10:23; 13:41; 19:28; 24:27, 37), though it also occurs in Mark (8:38; 13:26; 14:62) and Luke (17:30; 18:8; 21:36; 22:69).

Most often, however, the term is used with some reference to the suffering and death that was to be part of Jesus’ experience. In nine out of the fourteen uses in Mark, ‘Son of Man’ sayings refer to Jesus’ coming death. This characteristic use may appear to be all but incompatible with the previous references to triumph and glory, though Daniel 7 had identified the ‘one like a son of man’ as a representative of ‘the saints of the Most High’, who in the context were clearly undergoing great suffering and persecution. Some passages (e.g. Mark 9:12; 10:45) use ‘Son of Man’ language alongside allusions to suffering persons in the Old Testament (e.g. Psalms 22; 69; 118:22; Isaiah 52:13–53:12), thereby combining different traditional images to show Jesus as the one foretold in the ancient promises, who would accomplish God’s will not through military might but through suffering and service.

The phrase ‘Son of Man’ also occurs in the Gospel of John, with some of the same connotations as in the others, though with an additional emphasis on the Son of Man as one who came from heaven to earth and will return thence (3:13; 8:28), as well as a connection between his suffering and the celebration of the Christian Eucharist (6:53), and the use of the term to refer to Jesus being ‘lifted up’, an expression that John uses to refer to suffering (in the crucifixion, 3:14; 8:28; 12:34) as well as to glory and exaltation (12:23; 13:31).

The Messiah

This was not a title Jesus used for himself, and in Mark, the first gospel to be written, there is only one instance where he may have been doing so (9:41), though there are four significant occasions when other people called Jesus ‘the Messiah’, and he apparently accepted the title.

When Peter finally began to articulate his embryonic beliefs about who Jesus might be, and told him ‘You are the Christ’, Jesus replied that he was ‘blessed’ to have received such a special insight (Matthew 16:16–17).

Another occasion was during his trial before the Jewish authorities, when in response to a question from the high priest Jesus acknowledged that he was the Messiah (Mark 14:61–62).

There is also the story of how Jesus healed someone thought to be possessed by demons. Not only did he allow this man to address him as ‘Son of the Most High God’ (a Messianic title); he also told him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you’ (Mark 5:1–20).

On another occasion Jesus was going along a road near Jericho when a blind beggar named Bartimaeus called out and addressed him as ‘Son of David’ (another Messianic title). Though others who were standing around evidently told the man to be silent, Jesus did not do so, and therefore by implication seems to have accepted this acclamation for himself (Mark 10:46–52).

From these four instances it is clear that the gospels do not consistently show Jesus expressing the same attitude towards the claim that he was the Messiah on every occasion. By the time he appeared before the high priest it was obvious that he was to be condemned anyway, and so he apparently had no qualms about claiming to be the Messiah (though even on that occasion he immediately went on to re-define the concept in terms of the more nebulous 'Son of Man'). But when Peter confessed that he was the Messiah, Jesus told him and the other disciples to keep it secret and not to tell anyone else about it. On the other two occasions he apparently accepted a Messianic title from other people without making any further comment – and in the case of the man possessed by demons he told him to share his experience with his friends and relatives. Jesus' attitude to allowing people to believe he was the Messiah apparently varied according to the circumstances, and was partly dependent on the question of whether or not this claim should be publicized. How is such apparent inconsistency to be understood? Two possible explanations have dominated discussion of this issue.

Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah?

A simple solution is to say that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah at all, and Mark and the other gospel writers have written their stories of his life and teaching in the light of their own beliefs about Jesus rather than anything he claimed for himself. They knew that Jesus had been ambivalent about claiming to be the Messiah, but by the time they were writing it was more important for the church's mission that it should be made perfectly clear who Jesus really was. So Mark (the writer of the earliest gospel, whose lead was followed by Matthew and Luke) bridged the gap between his own beliefs and the reality of Jesus' more cautious self-perception by creating the literary motif of a 'messianic secret' as a way of explaining why Jesus was not widely regarded as Messiah during his lifetime. This idea was first proposed by William Wrede in a book published in German in 1901, and translated into English in 1971 as The Messianic Secret. The difficulty with this is that though it fits some of the evidence, there are other pieces of information that contradict it. There are, for example, the incidents involving the demon-possessed man at Gerasa and Bartimaeus at Jericho. More significantly, there is the undeniable reality that, while different people no doubt understood it in different ways, all sources (including extra-biblical ones)

describe Jesus as being condemned to death for claiming to be ‘king of the Jews’ (the Messiah). It is difficult to see how Mark could have left these stories in his narrative in this form if he had been so intent on making the idea of the ‘messianic secret’ convincing.

Jesus believed he was, but never claimed to be the Messiah?

We seem to be left with the implication that Jesus maybe thought he was the Messiah, but that he did not explicitly claim to be. This idea also raises some awkward questions, though three facts are particularly relevant to any consideration of such a possibility:

It needs to be remembered that, while the preservation of the story of Jesus’ life and teaching for posterity was undoubtedly one reason why the gospels were written, it was not the only one. An equally important purpose was to provide a resource for Christians at the time (mid- to late first century) that would facilitate their own spiritual nurture as well as their mission in inviting others to join them. Like today’s readers, those who first received the gospels had a broader perspective than those who were with Jesus during his lifetime. Their starting point was their own experience of faith, their reception of the Holy Spirit, and behind that their knowledge of the end of the story in Jesus’ death and resurrection. They had no difficulty in recognizing that Jesus must be the Messiah, sent by God to inaugurate that new way of being which he called ‘the kingdom of God’, for they knew their own lives had been so changed by following him that they believed themselves to be already living according to the new standards and values which Jesus had announced. The more time that passed, the more certain they were of this fact, which perhaps explains why the word ‘Christ’ is used so many times in John’s Gospel whereas it is hardly ever used in the other three; it is generally thought that John was writing later than the others, by which time Jesus’ messiahship was so self-evident that he could simply be called ‘Christ’ (Messiah) without the need for further definition or qualification.

Another point to consider is that the gospels themselves make it clear that Jesus and his contemporaries were at cross-purposes when they spoke of the Messiah. Most people assumed the Messiah would be a political ruler, something that Jesus constantly sought to deny and redefine, for to him being the Messiah meant humble service and obedience to God's will. So if he had used messianic terminology openly, that would not have clarified his message but would have had the opposite effect and would have concealed the real significance of what he was trying to say. It would certainly have brought about an early confrontation with the Romans. Even the disciples, including Peter who declared his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, seem not to have fully understood all the ramifications of that until much later. Despite their close relationship with Jesus, they displayed their ignorance of his intentions on more than one occasion (Mark 8:14–21; 9:30–32; 10:35–45). There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this portrayal, for by the time the gospels were written these same disciples were the church's heroes, and no one would have made up stories that gratuitously portrayed them in a bad light.

It makes good sense to conclude that Jesus' attitude was not entirely consistent, and that his whole life and work was a mixture of both revelation and secrecy. This correlates with what we know of the way he evidently called himself 'the Son of Man', which had no ready-made meaning. To those who were not prepared to reflect too deeply, it was a name that could only confuse, and conceal Jesus' claims rather than reveal them. At the same time, many incidents in Jesus' life – including the miracles, but also episodes such as his baptism (Mark 1:9–11), his temptations (Luke 4:1–13), and his entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–11) – would lose their meaning if they were not implicit claims to Messiahship. Many of the things Jesus did and said were exactly what the Messiah was expected to do and say.

The most satisfactory conclusion may then be that Jesus avoided use of the word 'Messiah' because it would have suggested to his hearers a definition of messiahship that he had already decisively rejected in the temptations, of an earthly king and a new political state. His ministry was therefore presented in a

way that would conceal any claim to be Messiah from those who did not want to understand it in the same way as he did, while offering sufficient clues to his identity as Messiah for those who were prepared to think about it more deeply.

The Son of God

The belief of the Christian church from the very earliest times has always included the statement that Jesus was ‘the Son of God’ – another expression that would be familiar to the people of Jesus’ day. In Hellenistic culture it could refer to a heroic human figure, and that is probably the way it was used by the Roman centurion at the cross who remarked of Jesus, ‘Truly this was the son of God’ (Matthew 27:54, KJV). That is certainly how Luke understood it, for in his account he has the centurion say, ‘Certainly this man was innocent’ (Luke 23:47, NRSV). For Jesus to be called ‘Son of God’ in the wider context of the Roman empire must have been a direct challenge to the power of the emperor, whose divine being was described in exactly the same way. Paul certainly knew that, and when he uses ‘Son of God’ terminology of Jesus, it is continuous with the claims made by Jesus himself – sending out the message that true divine sonship is not founded on peace-through-violence, but peace-through-justice and embodied in the generosity of self-giving love.

The term ‘Son of God’ also had a background in the Hebrew scriptures, where it was applied to the nation of Israel (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1), to leading individuals within the nation (e.g. Deuteronomy 14:1; Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 3:22), to angelic beings (Genesis 6:2–4; Job 1:6–12; Psalm 29:1), and to the king (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7). Partly as a result of the way this title was applied to the kings, especially those descended from David, it came to be applied to the Messiah as well (2 Esdras 7:28, and in the Qumrân texts at 1QSa 2:11–12; 4QFlor 1:10–13; 4QPsDanA). In this context it did not indicate a divine figure who was the bearer of salvation, except insofar as angels were thought of as messengers from God, and the status of ‘son of God’ was more often understood as a recognition by God of some particular achievement by the individual who received the title. In the Gospels, however, the notion of Jesus’ divine sonship is quite explicitly used to indicate that he enjoyed a special relationship with God. Notwithstanding all the debates about the authenticity of various sections of Jesus’ teaching, one thing on which there is a wide consensus is that Jesus consistently used parent-and-child language to refer to his relationship with God. Even at the early age of twelve, Luke depicts him

describing the temple at Jerusalem as ‘my Father’s house’ (2:49), and the story about the wicked tenants of the vineyard makes it clear that he himself was the heir whom the owner had sent to put things in order (Mark 12:1–11).

The claims implied by such stories are also made explicitly on the lips of Jesus, most strikingly in a statement included in both Matthew and Luke: ‘All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son…’ (Matthew 11:27, RSV; Luke 10:22). It is clear that Jesus was understood to be claiming a unique relationship with God, with very little room for misunderstanding. So what did it mean for Jesus to be spoken of in this way? This is one of the questions that theologians have thought and talked about for centuries, and it is only possible here to give a very sketchy account of it.

In any discussion of the nature of God, it should never be forgotten that to describe Jesus as ‘the Son of God’ is to invoke a familiar analogy to describe something that is, by definition, indescribable. When Jesus took the human relationship of child to parent, and said: ‘My relationship with God is a bit like that’, this was never intended to be a literal statement about the being of God. Talk of God as ‘father’ is not to be understood as a claim that God is male, though generations of Christians have uncritically made that assumption. Nor is the parent-child image meant to be applied inflexibly. There is no suggestion that every aspect of human family relationships can be paralleled by relationships with God and the gospels themselves warn against this kind of literal understanding, for though children might on occasion be able to say in a normal family that ‘Whoever hates me hates my Father also’ (John 15:23), no human could ever say ‘I and my Father are one’ (John 10:30, KJV).

Like the other titles reviewed here, this one had also been used in the Old Testament. The term ‘son of…’ was a common idiom of the Hebrew language. For example, the Israelites could be called ‘sons’ or ‘children’ of Israel, though modern translations often conceal the original wording by using inclusive

language (Deuteronomy 1:1; Judges 1:1). Wicked people are regularly referred to as ‘sons of wickedness’ or ‘sons of Belial’ (Deuteronomy 13:13), while the Hebrew word equivalent to ‘human beings’ is ‘children of men’ (1 Samuel 2:12). Though we would not now use the exclusively male-oriented language of the Hebrew Bible, if we described ourselves as ‘children of our parents’ we would be saying that we share precisely the same characteristics and nature as our parents before us. So when the New Testament says that Jesus is ‘the Son of God’ it is stating that Jesus shared the actual characteristics and nature of God. He was claiming to be really and truly divine, and to make a narrow distinction between the nature of ‘God’ and the nature of ‘the Son of God’ is to disregard the way that analogy is being used here, as well as to ignore the natural idiom of the linguistic context in which the New Testament was compiled.

In John 1:1–18 and Revelation 19:13, this relationship between Jesus and God is expressed in another way. There Jesus is called the ‘word’ or (in Greek) logos of God. God’s word is, of course, the way that God communicates. But when the New Testament calls Jesus ‘the word’ it says something more than that. The fourth gospel begins by stating that ‘the Word was God’ (John 1:1) – that is, God’s message to humankind was not just written in a book, it was displayed in a person. It continues with ‘the Word became a human being’, identifying the divine ‘word’ with Jesus (1:14). Moreover, because of the way the concept of the ‘logos’ had been used in circles inspired by Greek philosophy to denote the fundamental principle of the universe, it seems likely that some cosmic claim about Jesus and his message was also being made when such language was used.

Whether Jesus is described as ‘the Son of God’ or ‘the Word of God’, the implication is the same: the earliest Christians were all saying that through Jesus it is possible to gain a perfect image of what God is like. That is why it is worthwhile paying careful attention to uncovering the nuances of what Jesus was actually saying and doing, for the New Testament claims that in his life and teaching it is possible to see and hear what God is really like.

The Servant

The way Jesus depicts God is challenging and disturbing to conventional views, most of which owe a great deal to images inherited from the Greek philosophers, in which ‘God’ was portrayed as a being of great splendour, majesty, and, above all, power. The fourth title to be discussed here – ‘the servant’ – challenges that perception, and it seems to be the image that Jesus most readily applied to himself and his work. It is true that nowhere in the gospels do we find Jesus actually calling himself ‘the servant of God’, yet it is hard to get away from the impression that Jesus’ understanding of himself was so very different from current expectations precisely because he thought of his mission in terms of the suffering servant who features in four discrete poetic passages in the book of Isaiah (42:1–7, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12).

The gospels make many references to Jesus’ conviction that it was to be his lot to suffer, not least through their distinctive use of the term ‘Son of Man’ in that connection. From the time he was baptized, and perhaps before that, Jesus saw that the course of his life was to be one of suffering. The voice at his baptism, echoing words from one of the passages in Isaiah about the suffering servant (Mark 1:11; Isaiah 42:1), made it clear to him that his life’s work was to consist of humble self-denial, and this conviction was vigorously reiterated in his responses to the temptations. According to Mark, Jesus warned his disciples at a very early stage in his ministry that the day was near when he would be taken away from his friends (2:20). Immediately after Peter declared his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus again repeated that ‘the Son of Man must suffer many things’ (Mark 8:31, KJV), something reinforced by the further statement that ‘the Son of Man also came… to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45, RSV). There has been much debate about the extent to which these predictions of suffering, in particular, go back to Jesus himself. But if his teaching was really as radical as we think, challenging the deeply held belief of both Jewish and Roman leaders that peace, with God and among nations, could be accomplished through violence, then it is hardly surprising that he himself would become a victim of that same mindset.

Most of the titles applied to Jesus are challenging to understand in detail, largely because they all had varied meanings within their original context. But all have one very clear implication. There is no doubt that by applying them to Jesus, the gospel writers were claiming that he had a special relationship with God, and a unique authority to express the will of God. This authority was demonstrated in his claim to forgive the sins of other people, which the religious teachers of the day correctly recognized as a claim to exercise power that belongs only to God (Mark 2:1–12). But Jesus also demanded from his followers a loyalty and devotion that no ordinary human being could ever have the right to claim. He told would-be followers, 'Whoever does not bear their own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:27, author's translation). This claim to a unique relationship with God is expressed in John's Gospel in terms of a complete identification between Jesus and God ('I and the Father are one… whoever has seen me has seen the Father', 10:30, 14:9, NRSV), and an equivalent claim is found also in the Gospels of Matthew (11:27) and Luke (10:22). There is no question that the full significance of who Jesus was, and how that significance might best be articulated, only emerged as his followers reflected on their own experience of him, and in the light of the total picture of his life and ministry that was only possible after his death and resurrection. In the past, scholars have often attempted to distinguish some core tradition consisting of the actual words Jesus might have used from the further reflections on him that emerged as the gospel writers and others worked through the wider consequences of his life and teaching. Such an enterprise is not altogether misguided, and in chapter 11 we will need to give some further consideration to this matter. But when all is said and done, the gospels are the only portrayals we have of the life and teaching of Jesus, and it is ultimately a pointless exercise to try and find within them a simple religious teacher who had no awareness of his own possible significance in the divine scheme of things. Who would wish to crucify such a harmless person? It is a waste of time trying to separate the supposedly human figure, the 'Jesus of history', from the Christ and risen Lord who was soon regarded as equal with God in early Christian theology. Jesus is depicted making grand claims for himself in the very earliest records about him, and it is not possible to find in the New Testament a different Jesus without in the process so discrediting the overall reliability of the texts that it would scarcely be worth reading them for any purpose at all. If Jesus' followers later made new claims about his importance, or articulated these claims in new linguistic forms and cultural contexts, these were all firmly grounded in his own

teaching about himself and his understanding of his place in the plans of God.

Jesus beyond the Gospels

There are other traditions about Jesus' life and teaching that are not found in the gospels. Apart from Josephus and the rabbis, Jesus is also mentioned by the Latin authors Suetonius and Tacitus, as well as in the Qu'ran. Some church leaders in the early centuries quote teaching which they say was first given by Jesus (and is not traceable in the New Testament), while even in the New Testament itself there are occasional references to sayings of Jesus not found in the gospels (for example in Acts 20:35). But most attention has focused on a number of so-called 'infancy gospels' written in the second century and claiming to report the early childhood of Jesus, and the various Gnostic gospels, typified by the Gospel of Thomas.

The material preserved in these second-century sources is of a remarkably varied character. Much of it, especially in the infancy stories, is clearly legendary and was written to fill in the gaps that are left by the New Testament gospels. Many of their stories are so unreal and pointless that they can immediately be seen to be of a quite different character from the New Testament accounts of Jesus. Other questions are raised, however, by the collections of Jesus' sayings found in such documents as the Gospels of Philip and Thomas, or the various papyri discovered at Oxyrhynchus in upper Egypt. Most of these documents were written for sectarian purposes, and many of them emanate from the various Gnostic groups that were prevalent in the second century and later. The Gospel of Thomas in its present form seems to date from about the fourth century, and was compiled for the purpose of supporting the life of an esoteric group in the church, almost certainly a Gnostic group. It consists entirely of sayings of Jesus, not narratives about him, and many of its contents are obviously derived from the New Testament, but presented with a Gnostic slant, while others have probably come in direct from some other Gnostic source. Besides these, there are some others which appear to be of independent origin. For example, logion 82 of Thomas reads as follows: 'Jesus said, "Whoever is near me is near the fire, whoever is far from me is far from the kingdom."' This particular saying was also known to Origen (AD 185–254), and there may be allusions to it in other

early Christian writers. It is certainly characteristic of the type of saying attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and it also has the form of Aramaic poetry, which again is a regular feature of Jesus' teaching in the New Testament gospels. There are a number of such sayings scattered about in the literature of the early church. When they do not teach any obviously sectarian doctrine, and when they are in general agreement with the teaching of Jesus found in the New Testament, there seems to be no real reason for doubting that they could go back to authentic traditions about him. If, as in the example quoted, they also have the form of Semitic poetry, that can be a further indication of their primitive character. The fact that such information should have been preserved outside the New Testament is consistent with all that is known about the writing of the gospels. The author of John, for example, mentions many accounts of Jesus' life and teaching which he knew but chose not to include in his own gospel (John 20:30–31). They must have existed somewhere, and perhaps some of them ended up in the various documents mentioned here. But only a tiny proportion of these sayings from the extra-canonical traditions have even a slight claim to being genuine. Most of this material is quite worthless as a historical source for knowledge of Jesus, and its real value lies in highlighting the quality of information preserved in the New Testament gospels themselves.

CHAPTER 5

STORIES AND SIGNS

Jesus the teacher

In the ancient world, teachers were always given a place of special importance. Roman and Greek culture had a long tradition of philosophical schools going back to the time (centuries before Jesus) when eager students had sat at the feet of intellectual giants such as Plato or Socrates, hoping to discover the meaning of life. Though times changed, when the earliest disciples of Jesus took their message out into the great cities of the Roman empire there was still no shortage of people who were happy to spend time listening to a good teacher.

Jesus himself never set foot in ancient Greece or Rome, but he too was brought up in a culture that placed great value on the spoken word. There were books, of course – pre-eminently the Hebrew Bible, which was the subject of intense study by professional students (referred to in the gospels as 'the scribes') who devoted themselves to becoming familiar with its ancient wisdom so as to share their learning with others who had neither the ability nor the time for such study. They learned of the scriptures as they heard them being read in worship each sabbath, in a process that would be accompanied by a translation from the original Hebrew into the Aramaic which they normally spoke (and which eventually led to the production of written Aramaic versions, the Targums). Above all, they listened to the exhortations of the rabbis, as they explained what the requirements of the Law meant in terms of everyday life and behaviour.

Right from the start, Jesus was regarded as a religious teacher. Opponents as well as disciples, and people in general, all referred to him as a rabbi. He had opportunities to teach in local synagogues and in the Jerusalem temple, as well as speaking in fields and marketplaces wherever he went. People asked Jesus for his opinion on points of law and religion in much the same way as they did with the other rabbis. Typical questions involved divorce and marriage (Mark 10:1–12), adultery (John 7:53–8:11), family quarrels (Luke 12:13–15) and paying taxes (Mark 12:13–17), as well as more theological matters such as the commandments (Mark 12:28–34), or belief in resurrection (Mark 12:18–27), or the reasons for undeserved suffering (John 9:2–3). Judaism had a long tradition

of such teaching. Much of the Hebrew Bible had itself been transmitted by word of mouth before it was written down, and some of it consists of the written text of teaching that was originally delivered orally. The prophets were predominantly speakers, not writers, while the pithy sayings contained in a book like Proverbs were the sort of everyday wisdom that would be passed on in the home from one generation to another. The spoken word was always highly regarded, and even in the second century we find Papias, leader of the Christian community at Hierapolis in Asia Minor, writing that 'what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice' (reported in Eusebius, Church History iii.39). Perhaps this explains why it took the early Christians so long to get around to writing the gospels: apart from the fact that many of them were illiterate, they actually preferred to listen rather than to read.

Jesus' teaching was characterized by memorable stories and sayings. To hold people's attention, a teacher must be interesting, and Jesus was never dull or boring. His starting point was always the living experience of his hearers rather than abstract ideas. As a creative thinker himself, he recognized the power of storytelling. Stories seize the imagination, but they also create an open space in which people can reflect and reach their own conclusions. No two people take exactly the same lesson out of a story. Jesus was obviously a skilled communicator and people immediately recognized that he was different from other teachers (Mark 1:22). Other rabbis often insisted their disciples should learn their teachings off by heart but Jesus gave people freedom to think for themselves, and encouraged them to work out what God was saying to them personally in their own particular circumstances of life.

The extended stories that Jesus told are generally referred to as parables, though shorter sayings are also referred to in the same way. A popular proverb such as 'Physician, heal yourself' could be called a 'parable' (Luke 4:23), as also could the saying, 'Can one blind person guide another?' (Luke 6:39, NLT) – and the same terminology was applied to the more or less factual statement (perhaps originally some kind of riddle) that 'there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile' (Mark 7:15–16, NRSV). There are also many other places where Jesus used words to conjure up

a vivid mental image that would help to communicate his message. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) he spoke of salt, light, a city, birds, and flowers, while in John's Gospel he described himself as 'the good shepherd' (10:1–18), 'the true vine' (15:1–11), bread (6:35), or life-giving water (7:37–39), and talked of the disciples being called to reap a harvest (4:31–38). This sort of graphic language ensured that Jesus' teachings would always be easy to remember.

Parables and their meaning

Though there is considerable diversity in Jesus' teaching style, it is usual and convenient to reserve the word 'parable' for the extended stories that Jesus told.

Parable or allegory?

For centuries, the usual way of understanding these story parables was to think of them as ‘allegories’. An allegory is a detailed account of one subject, written in such a way that it appears to be about something altogether different. A classic example of this would be John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress written in 1678, which is actually about the nature of the Christian life though it is written in the form of a story of someone on a journey. A New Testament example would be the allegory of the vine and its branches (John 15:1–11), in which Jesus appears to be explaining how to prune a vine so as to maximize its yield of grapes, but then he starts talking about a branch deciding to cut itself off from the main stem of the plant and it becomes obvious that he is not really giving a lesson on the cultivation of grapes, but is talking about issues in the life of discipleship. There are actually very few allegories in the gospels, and in most cases this method of understanding the parables misses the point of Jesus’ teaching.

A good example of the dangers of mistaken interpretation can be found in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The story begins with one of Jesus’ hearers asking, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ and Jesus answered it by telling this questioner to behave as the Samaritan had done in the story. As the Christian faith engaged with the intellectual culture of the Roman empire, stories like that seemed shallow when compared with the complex speculations of Greek philosophy, and one way to extract a ‘deeper’ meaning from the parables was by treating them as allegories concealing abstract truths about the universe and God. Using this approach, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) identified the unnamed traveller going from Jerusalem to Jericho as Adam, with ‘Jerusalem’ being the heavenly city of peace from which he fell and ‘Jericho’ representing the human mortality that he inherited as a result of his disobedience (Genesis 3:1–24). The robbers were the devil and his angels who stripped him of his immortality, while the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side were the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could not save him. The good Samaritan was Jesus himself, and his binding of the victim’s wounds was the restraint of sin. The oil and wine that he poured in were the comfort of hope and encouragement to work hard. The beast was the flesh in which Christ came to

earth; the inn was the church, and the innkeeper the apostle Paul. The two denarii he was paid were the commandments to love God and neighbour (Augustine, Quaestiones Evangeliorum 2.19). This is undoubtedly an ingenious account of Augustine's understanding of Christian theology, but its connection with Jesus' story of the good Samaritan is very far-fetched. These 'spiritual meanings' are read into the story rather than coming out of it, and in Augustine's version the answer to the original question asked of Jesus is completely lost.

The point of the parables

This method of interpretation was not seriously challenged until the end of the nineteenth century. When scholars began to read the New Testament in its historical context, it was obvious that Jesus must have used parables in much the same way as other teachers of his time. After comparing Jesus' parables with other ancient examples, Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938) suggested that they were intended as illustrations to make a particular point. So, for example, in the parable of the good Samaritan the main point was that the person who proved to be a real neighbour was not an orthodox believer but a member of a despised and heretical social grouping, the Samaritans. All the other details in the story, about the ass and the inn, the oil and wine, were an imaginative description of the scene to make the story realistic and interesting, but they had no intrinsic connection with the main point of what Jesus was trying to say. This realization resolved some long-standing questions about the parables. In some of them the main characters are not the sort of people whose actions Christians have ever felt they ought to copy. There was the unjust steward, for example, who gained his employer's approval by manipulating the accounts to his own advantage (Luke 16:1–8). Was Jesus really commending that sort of behaviour? Once the parables were no longer viewed as allegorical, questions like that were seen to be irrelevant, because the main point of the story was that people should copy this steward's far-sighted determination to be prepared for a crisis in life. The other details were there just to give a realistic portrayal of an imaginary situation.

Once this insight was accepted, it led to a flurry of activity by scholars to apply this new approach to all the parables of Jesus, most notably C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) in England and Joachim Jeremias (1900–1979) in Germany. All subsequent scholars have followed their lead, understanding the parables not as allegories of Christian belief but simply as stories, and recognizing Jesus as a master storyteller. However, more recent study has also identified greater diversity in the parables than Jülicher supposed to be the case. In particular, he tended to regard their subject matter as generalized ethical ideas, whereas they were actually an integral aspect of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, and are to be understood in parallel with the miracles, which also both depicted and

inaugurated the new way of being into which Jesus invited his hearers. The connection between parables and miracles is explored later in this chapter. Before that, we need to note that the parables themselves are somewhat more diverse and carefully nuanced than these earlier scholars sometimes thought.

Though it is generally true that each of the parables of Jesus has only one main point, it can be misleading to insist that no parable can ever have more than one interpretation. Some of them quite obviously are intended to have multiple meanings. The parable of the talents, for example, seems to be making at least two simple points (Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27). The story concerns a householder who is going away and divides the family fortune among the servants for safe keeping. On the householder's return, the servants are rewarded in different ways, depending on how they have used what was entrusted to them. The main point of the story is to emphasize the connection between individual responsibility and final accountability, but there is another emphasis that in the context of Jesus' teaching about God is just as important, for the householder went well beyond any legal or moral obligations by entrusting the property to the servants in the first place. The parable of the wedding feast makes exactly the same two points (Matthew 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24), and in both cases they serve as reminders of the centrality of generosity and accountability for those who would aspire to live by the values of the kingdom.

While most parables clearly are not allegorical, some may be. In the parable of the sower the different kinds of ground are said to correspond to different types of people hearing Jesus' message (Matthew 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15), and that is an allegorical explanation of its meaning. It has often been argued that this application was not original to Jesus himself, but was added by the earliest Christians as a way of explaining why only a few people responded to their message. There is no doubt that this parable could be used to help answer a question like that. But if this interpretation of the parable is rejected as being only a secondary meaning, perhaps added later (and therefore, by implication, of lesser value), there is still a need to explain what the main point might have been as Jesus first told it. A survey of the various attempts that have been made in the commentaries on the gospels reveals that it is very difficult to imagine a different

meaning for it, and many commentators follow a tortuous route to end up back where the gospel writers started from. An even more striking example of the apparent need for some allegorical understanding is the parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33–45; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19). The story here concerns a vineyard owner who rented the property out to tenants for a price that included part of the annual crop of grapes. When the owner's servants arrived to collect the agreed share of the crop, they were beaten up and killed. After this happened several times the owner's son was sent in the hope that he might be given more respect, but the same thing happened again. In the end, it was inevitable that when the owner was forced to pay a personal visit the tenants would be thrown out of the vineyard and punished. In this story, an allegorical interpretation seems to be the only meaning possible – for if Israel was not the vineyard, and the prophets were not the servants sent by the owner (God), and Jesus was not the son, then the whole parable loses its point. It therefore seems wise to adopt a more flexible approach, and to recognize that though the parables do not normally need an allegorical interpretation, some of them might.

Parables and their hearers

Twentieth-century scholarship emphasized the importance of understanding the parables in their historical context, and consequently invested much energy in trying to uncover the exact ‘life situation’ of the various parables, thinking that by doing so their immediate meaning will be easier to grasp. This was a natural outcome of the adoption of a historical-critical approach to the Bible (the strengths and weaknesses of which are discussed in more detail in chapter 21), and there is no doubt that much can be said in support of the view that in order to understand what the New Testament might mean today, it will help to know what it meant to those who first read it. But in terms of their literary style or genre, the parables are quite different from most other parts of the New Testament, and in most cases it is not possible to discover the precise situations in which Jesus told particular stories.

Some parables have a story attached to them, and this may offer an indication of their original life setting in the ministry of Jesus. There is, for example, no reason to doubt that the parable of the good Samaritan was given in answer to the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ addressed to Jesus by a religious leader. Similarly, the parable about the unforgiving servant makes perfect sense when reported in the form of a reply to Peter’s question about how often he should forgive someone who was offending him (Matthew 18:21–35). Likewise, it is hard to imagine a more appropriate setting for the story of the rich fool than as part of the answer to a question about the best way of dividing a legacy (Luke 12:13–21). But some parables appear in different contexts in different gospels. The parable of the lost sheep features in Luke alongside the parables of the lost coin and lost son as an answer to the Pharisees’ complaints about the bad company Jesus was keeping (15:1–7), whereas in Matthew the same parable is told as an encouragement to the disciples to be faithful ‘shepherds’ of the church (18:12–14). Given what we know about the respective aims and objectives of Matthew and Luke, it seems likely that it was these writers who chose the appropriate context for the parables within their own narratives, though Jesus himself could easily have told the same story more than once, and drawn different lessons on each occasion. But the fact is that these parables are

exceptional in having any background information at all attached to them, and nothing is known about the circumstances in which most of the parables were first told. This is emphasized by the way they are collected together in blocks in the various gospels. Matthew has a complete section of his gospel devoted entirely to parables (chapter 13); Mark contains a similar (though not identical) collection (chapter 4), while Luke also has a long section predominantly composed of parables (13:18–16:31).

An understanding of the general cultural context in which the parables were first told will always shed light on particular details of the stories, but it is not necessary to understand every nuance of their imagery in order to grasp the essential message. Stories like those in Luke 15, describing the woman who had lost a precious coin, the shepherd who had lost a sheep, and the parent whose child ran away from home, are not culture specific but connect with human experience in all times and places. They are more like works of art than discourses on religion, and like all art their characters and situations have a correspondingly universal quality that can be understood by anyone, for they deal with the basic condition of what it means to be human. Parables create a space in which to reflect on one's own life, and it is only as readers identify themselves with the lost sheep, the wicked tenants, or the person who discovers a field of hidden treasure, that their full impact is felt. Like all stories, they invite us onto new territory by offering an opportunity to reimagine the world as we know and experience it – in this case, to do so in the light of Jesus' portrayal of God's character. The parables not only paint a picture of what life might be like when God's ways of doing things are taken seriously, they also invite their hearers to commit themselves unconditionally to living this way.

The message

In the broadest sense, the subject of the parables is the coming of God's kingdom, and many of them actually begin with the words, 'The kingdom of God is like…'. Four main themes can be discerned, each one emphasizing some particular aspect of 'the kingdom of God' and its impact on the lives of those who are a part of it.

The kingdom and its ruler

Even in democracies where governments are chosen by popular acclaim, leaders shape their communities. Authoritarian rulers will have little difficulty in persuading their people to adopt the same attitudes, while the example set by generous, humane rulers will usually encourage their people to share a similar viewpoint. The kingdom of God is no exception: it takes its character and form from the God who is its sovereign. Several parables illustrate significant aspects of God's own nature. The story of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7) underlines the fundamental fact of God's undeserved love ('grace'): God takes the initiative in finding those who, for whatever reason, have lost their way and need renewal and healing. God is concerned when even a single person loses their way in life, and has an irresistible urge to go after that lost one. The other parables in Luke 15 (the lost coin and the lost son) emphasize the same theme of God's unconditional love for all humanity. Even when people get themselves into a mess – like the lost son – God never abandons them but is always ready to welcome them back to a place of safety.

The remarkable extent of God's generosity is illustrated in the story about the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). In this parable, Jesus told of an employer who hired workers for a vineyard. They started work at different hours of the day, so that when the time came for them to be paid some had only worked for an hour while others had worked the whole day. To everyone's

amazement, they all received the same wage, and because they had all agreed their pay in advance the employer was not cheating anyone. What happened was that the employer was unexpectedly generous to those who only started late in the day, by giving them as much as if they had been there right from the beginning. This, said Jesus, is what the kingdom of heaven is like: God is overwhelmingly generous, and those who embrace the kingdom and its values only reluctantly or at the last minute can expect to be valued every bit as much as those who have been first in the door. Of course, it would be possible to read this parable in a different way, to imply that God is unfair – for surely those who arrived early did deserve more than those who came to work late in the day. This was the sort of question Jülicher was trying to address when he suggested that a parable normally has only one point. In the case of this one he was undoubtedly correct, for there are many other sayings of Jesus that show God as overwhelmingly responsive to all human needs. There is, for example, the story of the friend who requested food at midnight, which Luke uses to emphasize that God is only too willing to answer prayers: 'Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you' (Luke 11:5–9). Another example would be the story of the unjust judge, which makes a similar point (Luke 18:1–8). Then there are the statements in the Sermon on the Mount which, though not story parables, are certainly parables in the wider sense of the word.

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?… And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies… how they grow; they neither toil nor spin;… if God so clothes the grass of the field… can you not expect God to give even better clothing to you – you of little faith?

Matthew 6:26–30, author's translation

God cares about people, even down to the smallest details. In the course of his ministry, Jesus met many people – religious ones among them – who were actually incapable of accepting his message because this emphasis on God's

generous love did not match their preconceived expectations of how God should be. Many felt that God's love ought to be dispensed on a legalistic basis, and those who considered themselves the most law abiding should have the first claim on it. Like Paul after him, Jesus knew that we all struggle to live up to our own highest ideals, and that living in accordance with his new values of love and justice would require radical change even from the most law-abiding members of society.

This emphasis on the close personal relationship that exists between God and those who commit themselves to living in God's way is one of the most strikingly original parts of Jesus' teaching. Jesus himself addressed God as 'Father' and in John's Gospel this way of expressing Jesus' relationship to God is a way of explaining his nature as a divine person (John 1:14, 18; 5:43; 8:19). But the other three gospels more often emphasize the character of the relationship, implying that God can be addressed and known in the same intimate way as a human father might be addressed by a child. Jesus used the word Abba, the Aramaic term for father that would be used in the familiarity of the home, and he encouraged disciples to do the same when addressing God in prayer (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2). This way of speaking to God was apparently unique. Although in Jewish tradition God could on occasion be referred to as 'Father', that was inevitably qualified by some reference to God's holiness and majesty, thereby distancing the image from the informal family language that Jesus used. Jesus' parables repeatedly portray a God who is not remote and out of touch with the real world, but a God with whom ordinary people – even those who feel themselves unworthy – can enjoy a close personal and loving relationship. Like the best kind of parent, God watches over all those who commit themselves to living by the standards of the kingdom, and cares about the very smallest detail of their lives.

Jesus, of course, was living in a patriarchal culture where the father was head of his household and responsible for the lives of all family members. In that context, the imagery of father as applied to God invoked notions of care, faithfulness, love, and sacrifice. This is one of those instances where it is important to recall that we are dealing with a human metaphor to express something that can only be described through analogy and pictorial language. In

Matthew 23:37, Jesus says of the people of Jerusalem that he has ‘desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood’ (NRSV) – and no one would ever imagine that the use of that image implies that he was a chicken! To suppose that Jesus’ use of masculine metaphors means that he thought God is actually male is similarly to misunderstand the purpose of that imagery. God is beyond human categories of experience, and therefore in a significant sense is without gender. But if God is relational, then it is inevitable that images from human relationships will be used to describe God, however inadequate they might eventually turn out to be. Jesus does of course assume a particularly perfect form of family relationship between parent and child, which was not the experience of everyone in the ancient world, any more than it is today. But one of the key elements of his teaching is the way in which his statements about God challenge even the most perfect human relationships that can be imagined. In reality, the attributes of God as portrayed by Jesus are very far removed from the image of a patriarchal male wanting to control and dominate in a macho way. The relational qualities of which Jesus spoke regularly challenge traditional male stereotypes – and, in addition, Jesus was not averse to using female imagery to describe God’s loving generosity (Luke 15:8–10).

The kingdom and its people

To be included in God’s kingdom not only gives people the privilege of knowing God in an intimate and personal way, it also imposes certain responsibilities on them. A number of the stories Jesus told emphasize the kind of response required from his hearers if they are to ‘enter the kingdom’. Mark summarized Jesus’ teaching in the invitation to ‘Repent and believe in the gospel’ (1:15, RSV), and many of the stories told by Jesus emphasize the importance of being prepared for a radical change in lifestyle (‘repenting’) on the part of those who would be members of God’s kingdom. The story of the lost son, already mentioned, not only emphasizes the goodness and generosity of the loving parent: it also underlines the importance of the child realizing his foolishness and being willing to change his way of life (Luke 15:11–32).

Repentance has never been a popular idea, for it involves the recognition of inadequacy and failure and means a certain loss of face and moral credibility. But Jesus made it plain that being honest about personal failures is the starting point for any kind of meaningful relationship with God. There is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, who went to pray in the temple alongside one another. The Pharisee prided himself on his moral and religious attainments – and told God so. The tax collector, on the other hand, was so consumed by shame that he could only cry out, 'God, have pity on me, a sinner.' But, said Jesus, 'the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home', because he recognized his own weakness and came to God with no spiritual pretensions (Luke 18:9–14). A similar point is made in the story of the rich fool, who thought that his wealth would place him in good standing with God (Luke 12:13–21). Moreover, Jesus made the teaching of these parables quite explicit in his statement that living in God's way is not a matter for negotiation, but is something to be accepted in an attitude of childlike trust: 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it' (Luke 18:17; Mark 10:15).

Willingness to change, and forgiveness for the past, are not the end of the matter: they are only the beginning of a life lived according to the way God does things. For in the kingdom, there is a new kind of life, 'eternal life' or 'abundant life' as it is called in some of the sayings recorded in John's Gospel (John 3:15; 6:54; 10:28; 17:3). Life in the kingdom means a life that is empowered by God. Those who choose to live by God's values commit themselves to putting it all into practice on a daily basis, and this has unmistakable repercussions for their lifestyles:

It means they will be more concerned with what God thinks about them than what other people may think. Though some may accept God's standards only reluctantly, struggling to fulfil their own highest aspirations, their devotion is preferable to those who make a great show of serving God but who in reality are unprepared to change in any significant way (Matthew 21:28–32). God's people must live in the spirit of the widow who secretly put her last coin into the offering-box at the temple (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). They will not behave

ostentatiously so that others will applaud their much-publicized goodness, but will work and live quietly and without self-advertising, knowing that God – the only one who truly matters – will reward them (Matthew 5:4–6, 16–18).

This requirement is not, however, to become an excuse for doing nothing. Those who want to adopt God's way of doing things for themselves must make good use of God's provision for them. They should act responsibly, using the resources God has given them, and like the unjust steward, they should always be ready to be accountable for their actions (Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27; Luke 16:1–8).

Those who imagine they have arrived in some moral or spiritual sense have scarcely begun to comprehend God's ways, for being a part of the kingdom is about journeying with God in the expectation that new possibilities will open up all the time. Two of the shortest parables illustrate this: the stories about the hidden treasure and the pearl (Matthew 13:44–45). Someone who finds a field full of treasure will have no hesitation in selling all they possess in order to be able to buy that field. Or, similarly, a merchant looking for fine pearls who comes across an especially good specimen will sacrifice everything to be able to own it. God's kingdom is like that: the journey may be demanding and difficult, but it is always worthwhile in the end.

The kingdom and the community

Though Jesus was clearly offering personal empowerment to those who would respond to him, it would be wrong to imagine that his message was a narrowly individualistic spirituality. A large part of his teaching concerns the relationship of disciples to the wider community, and to one another. Indeed, in the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus seems to suggest that the way God deals with us will in some way depend on the way we deal with other people (Matthew 18:21–35). There is also Jesus' insistence that loving our neighbour is the second most important duty after loving God (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31). Those who

accept God's standards must behave like God, and since God's generosity extends to those on the margins of society, Jesus' disciples should be the same. The good Samaritan in the parable is not just an imaginary person to be admired, but is to be a role model for real-life situations (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus put this into practice himself, by taking his message to the outcasts of society. This was such an unexpected reversal of the role of a religious teacher that the disciples could hardly have failed to realize that the kingdom of God was indeed present already in this person whom they had chosen to follow. Not only did the kingdom mean a new relationship with God, but it also bound them to one another in a new community of caring service and mutual love.

The kingdom and the future

A number of parables refer to the coming of God's kingdom in the future, depicting Jesus as the transcendent Son of man, and describing the establishment of that peace-with-justice that was at the heart of his message. Some have thought that this was just a dramatic way of presenting the challenge of Jesus' message as it came to his hearers when they first heard it. But in view of the strongly apocalyptic colouring of the language that is used, it is hard to escape the conclusion that it would have been understood by Jesus' hearers as relating to a future in which God's just society would come to pass in some tangible way. Some parables depict a great day of reckoning, when those who merely profess to serve God but do not actually do so will be sifted out from those who really commit to doing God's will. This is the main lesson of the parables about the fishing-net, the corn and the weeds, and the sheep and the goats (Matthew 13:24–30, 47–50; 25:31–33). In other parables the future consummation of the kingdom is described as a feast, using imagery traditionally associated with the blessings of a future messianic age. But Jesus' descriptions of it make it clear that not everyone will get a place at the table. Indeed, the parable of the great supper suggests that the conventionally religious will have no place in it at all, and those who share in its blessings are more likely to come in from the streets than from the sanctuaries (Matthew 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24). Matthew's Gospel emphasizes the responsibilities that all this places on those who profess to be trying to live in God's way. Since no one knows the day or the hour when the final accounting will take place, they must be in a state of constant readiness,

like the attendants of a bride waiting for the bridegroom to arrive at a wedding (Matthew 25:1–13). This element in Jesus' teaching transcends any sharp distinction between what is future and what is present. Because Jesus has come, the kingdom of God, understood as God's way of doing things, has already arrived. Those who are willing to embrace that new way of living are already a part of the kingdom, which means that whatever else may be revealed in the future will be not so much a new start, as the final working out of all the implications of something that, in its essence, is already here. And those implications are truly wide-ranging. They can be compared to the growth of the mustard seed, 'the smallest seed in the world' which matures into one of the biggest plants of all (Matthew 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–34; Luke 13:18–19). Faithful following of Jesus has world-transforming potential.

Kingdom and church

How did Jesus imagine his teaching on the kingdom of God would relate to the church? Indeed, did he ever think about a church at all? Two statements in Matthew seem to suggest that he did (16:18–20; 18:17), though some scholars believe these statements come from Matthew himself, and not directly from the teaching of Jesus. Albert Schweitzer, for example, found it impossible to think that Jesus intended to found a church, for he believed that Jesus expected the immediate end of the world. But even those who do not share this opinion have often rejected the notion that Jesus was intent on starting any kind of organization. The theological liberals of the early twentieth century viewed Jesus as a simple ethical teacher, and because they regarded the concept of a church as inconsistent with this, they concluded that it was a later alien elaboration of his originally simple message.

Why parables?

Mark 4:11–12 seems to suggest that Jesus told parables with the intention of obscuring his teaching from those who were not already disciples, so that, echoing words from Isaiah 6:9–10, ‘they may see but not perceive, and hear but not understand, in case they should repent and be forgiven’ (author’s translation). Such an idea is so contrary to all we know of Jesus that some explanation seems to be required. Many suggestions have been put forward, of which we mention two.

The most popular explanation is that this was not a genuine saying of Jesus, but reflects the conclusions of the early church as they tried to comprehend why Jesus’ message had been rejected by the religious establishment. It was, they said, a part of the providential wisdom of God, who had always intended this to happen. There are, however, two arguments against this view. Firstly, it was only the first generation of Christians who were deeply concerned that the Jews had rejected Jesus. The church was Jewish only at a very early stage of its development, and after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans inAD70 Jewish Christianity almost ceased to exist. It certainly had little influence on the church at large. This means that the problem was most acute not long after the events of Jesus’ own lifetime – and the nearer we are in time to Jesus himself, the less room there must be for the church making additions and alterations to his teaching. Secondly, Matthew’s Gospel has a similar saying, quoting the same passage from Isaiah. Since we know Matthew was specially interested in the relative status of Jews and Christians, we would expect him to have preserved exactly the same words as Mark, if this statement was indeed concerned with the Jewish rejection of Jesus. But in fact the statement in Matthew’s Gospel has a slightly different implication. There Jesus says: ‘This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand’ (Matthew 13:13,RSV).

A second possible explanation begins with that statement in Matthew. On this understanding we need to suppose that the word translated ‘so that… they may see’ in Mark is actually meant to be the beginning of a factual statement, much as it is in Matthew. Evidence for this view can be drawn from a comparison of the Greek that Mark wrote with the Aramaic statements that most probably lay behind it. Thus the statement describes not thepurposeof teaching in parables, but the inevitableconsequencesof doing so. Jesus was pointing out that the parables will inevitably separate those who listen to them with spiritual insight from those who are spiritually blind.

This second explanation is the more likely. It fits with what we saw in a previous chapter about Jesus’ attitude to keeping his messiahship secret, and it also fits well with the nature of Jesus’ teaching, in particular the centrality of storytelling. The way in which this alleged ‘problem’ has been defined highlights one of the weaknesses of Western scholarship and its over-reliance on cognitive, analytical approaches to understanding truth. In the context of abstract philosophical discourse, there would indeed be a contradiction between saying that a set of propositions both revealed and concealed something at one and the same time. But storytelling is a completely different form of communication, which allows more flexibility in the exploration of meanings and deliberately creates space for different possible responses in a way that the methods of traditional philosophical argument do not. Almost by definition, truth is both hidden and revealed when it is embodied in story. This phenomenon is found throughout all cultures and at all periods of history. Stories can be understood as simple narratives and told exclusively for their entertainment value. On the other hand, they generally invite those who hear them to engage at a different level in order to see them as reflections of life and its challenges. Jesus’ parables fit this model exactly: many people could listen to them and hear nothing more than entertaining stories. In that sense, the core of his message was ‘hidden’ by the story form. But for those who were committed to the search for spiritual meaning, the same stories could open up new spaces in which to explore the implications of his message, and to reflect on the nature of God and the kingdom which Jesus had come to announce.

Though very few people today would agree with this opinion, it does highlight two important facts that need to be borne in mind in any discussion about Jesus and the idea of ‘church’:

‘The church’ need not imply the sort of religious hierarchy that evolved in the second century and that is familiar in institutionalized Christianity today. Jesus spoke of two or three people gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20), and in everyday speech the Greek word for ‘church’ (ekklēsia) first referred to a gathering of citizens.

In the strict sense it is probably anachronistic to speak of the existence of ‘the church’ in the lifetime of Jesus. The church in the New Testament saw itself as more than just a social grouping of like-minded people organized as a religious society. Its own self-consciousness was of being a group of people who shared in a common life because of the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself, and their participation in the empowerment that came from the Holy Spirit. In this specific sense, therefore, the church could only have come into existence after the foundational events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which is why the New Testament depicts the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost as the real ‘founding’ of the church (Acts 1:8; 2:1–4).

Clearly, then, any statement about Jesus as the church’s founder needs to be carefully qualified. But at the same time, there are strong indications in the gospels that he certainly aspired to form a community of those who followed him.

All the gospels show Jesus as the person in whom the messianic promises of the Old Testament had been fulfilled, and a significant element of traditional expectation was the belief that the Messiah would set up a new community in which people could enjoy a close relationship with God as well as with one

another. No matter how vaguely Jesus may have seen himself as a messianic figure, it would be a natural part of such an image for him to envisage the foundation of a community among his followers. In addition, Jesus' favourite name for himself, Son of Man, also contains a corporate dimension. It is probably incorrect to say, as some have done, that every time Jesus used this name he meant to include his disciples along with himself, but there is no doubt that in the book of Daniel the Son of Man was not simply an individual, but a representative member of 'the saints of the most high' (Daniel 7:13–18).

When Jesus describes his own work in relation to God's kingdom, his words often suggest that he is talking about a group of people linked not only to God, but to one another. For example, he speaks of himself as a shepherd, implying that there would be a flock of sheep under his care (John 10:1–18; Luke 12:32). In comparing himself to a vine and his disciples to its branches, he must have been meaning to suggest that the branches would be connected with each other as well as with the main stem (John 15:1–11). Much of what Jesus says about the kingdom would be difficult to understand without assuming that he had a visible group of followers in mind (Matthew 23:13; Luke 16:16), while his ethical teaching could only make sense within community life (Matthew 5:22; 7:3–5).

Those parables describing the kingdom of God as a visible entity also imply some sort of organized structure – parables like the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32), the corn and the weeds (Matthew 13:24–30), the fishing-net (Matthew 13:47–50), the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) and the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1–14).

While it might be doubted whether Jesus ever expected the church to become the sort of establishment it did in the days of Christendom, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that he anticipated a continuing community of his followers, and that the churches his disciples later founded were an attempt to give tangible expression to that.

Signs of the kingdom

Some of the most distinctive parts of the gospels are the stories about Jesus performing what are usually called miracles. He healed the sick (Mark 1:29–34), exercised authority over the forces of nature (Mark 4:35–41), and on occasion even raised the dead (Mark 5:21–43; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–44). Of all the subjects related to Jesus, this is the one that has presented most problems for readers of the gospel stories in recent centuries. It is generally not difficult to grasp Jesus' teaching about God and the kingdom, but when it comes to the miracle stories many people, including some Christians, have found it hard to imagine that these events could actually have taken place as they are described.

Influenced by the scientific rationalism that has permeated Western culture for the last 200–300 years, there has been a tendency to dismiss the miracle stories as evidence of the ignorance and superstition of ancient people. As the twentieth century progressed, this opinion became much less credible than it had seemed in the days of colonialism and empire-building, when Western people were still generally convinced by the scientific-materialist worldview that enabled them to imagine their way of doing things was the most advanced form of understanding there could ever be. For people who held a low opinion of all cultures except their own, it was not difficult to dismiss the perceptions of ancient people as ill-informed if not illusory. Today, however, that kind of opinion can be seen for what it was: ethnic arrogance and a form of intellectual colonialism. There is plenty of evidence to show that ancient people were no more gullible or naïve than their modern counterparts. In addition, the more science has discovered, the more mysterious many things have turned out to be, illness and its cures being prominent among them. As knowledge of cultures outside the West has increased, it has become obvious that it is rationalism, with its insistence on 'logical' explanations of cause-and-effect that is the aberration, not the belief in a spiritual world that is beyond what we normally see and handle. When most of the world's people at all times and places have never had any hesitation in accepting the reality of such things, it is only an introverted and defensive form of intellectual and cultural imperialism that will question it.

That is not to say that we should suspend our normal critical faculties: being aware of our own bias does not excuse us from reflecting seriously on the miracle stories, whether that bias inclines us to doubt what ‘really’ happened or to accept everything at face value. Even the very word ‘miracle’ is not as unambiguous as it might seem. Someone brought up in a remote tribe might see a modern invention like a computer or a cell phone and regard it as a miracle, whereas another person will know how it works, and describe it differently. A mother with a long history of miscarriages and stillbirths may have a healthy baby, and she regards it as a miracle – while someone else can point to the statistics, and say it was bound to happen sooner or later. People can look at the same event and, depending on their perspective, make rather different assessments of what has taken place. For example, it is widely recognized that there is a close link between mind and body, and even ailments that present very physical symptoms can have psychological roots. It would be surprising if some of the illnesses cured by Jesus were not psychosomatic, as we would say nowadays. Some stories seem to hint as much, for instance the account of how Jesus healed a woman with a haemorrhage merely by her touching his clothes (Mark 5:25–34), or when he cured a blind man by mixing clay and placing it on his eyes (John 9:1–11).

Almost all scholars would agree that Jesus did these things, though there would be differences of opinion regarding how they should be understood and categorized by reference to the ways we might now describe diseases and healing. But there is no doubt that the purpose the miracles serve in the New Testament is as a demonstration in deeds of the truth of what Jesus said in words, in his parables and elsewhere. It was not just his teaching that was so distinctive, but his deeds, and both engendered admiration and opposition in equal measure. For the gospel writers, the point about the miracles was not so much what he did, but when he did it – and to whom. In his first public announcement of his mission, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus referred to an expectation that the messianic age would bring ‘good news to the poor… liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind’ (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 35:5–6, which was widely regarded as a description of the coming messianic age). When Jesus healed those who were deaf, dumb, lame, and blind, the crowds would need no prompting to make that connection. They would also notice that the

circumstances in which he cured people often infringed traditional laws, not just by doing so on the sabbath but also by healing those regarded as non-people because they were of the wrong racial origins (such as the Gentile woman in Mark 7:24–30), or they lived in the wrong places (like the man in the Gentile graveyard in Mark 5:1–20), not to mention others who were considered to be ritually impure (such as the woman with a permanent menstrual flow, Mark 5:25–34).

How could anyone of goodwill possibly be opposed to the healing of those who were suffering? That was the common-sense question asked by Jesus when he cured a man with a paralyzed hand in the synagogue (Mark 3:4). When expressed that way, any opposition would seem particularly perverse, but Jesus did not primarily heal people because he was sorry for them. He saw disadvantage of any kind as a sign of fractured relationships that challenged God's intention for humankind – and so he could be 'filled with anger' at the plight of someone disfigured by leprosy (Mark 1:40–45). He did not however identify suffering with personal wrongdoing, or suggest that sufferers were in any way responsible for their own misfortune. On the contrary, when the Pharisees suggested that was the case he categorically denied it (John 9:1–5). But if God's kingdom was to displace 'the kingdom of this world', then it had to take seriously the problem of disease. There was, therefore, an indispensable theological underpinning to Jesus' miracles, and it was this to which his opponents took exception. Close scrutiny of the miracle stories uncovers the same underlying themes as we have noticed in Jesus' teaching. God is presented as a loving parent, who cares for all people without exception. Just as Jesus taught in words and by his own attitude that God loves all kinds of people, so his miracles regularly involved the outcasts of society, showing that his declaration of God's care was not just talk, but was to result in action (Matthew 8:1–4; Luke 17:11–19; Mark 5:21–43). Healing and forgiveness also went hand in hand (Mark 2:1–12), while faith could be called for on the part of those who would be healed (Mark 5:32–34, 9:14–29), and at least one story implies that the absence of faith was a hindrance to the work of healing (Mark 6:5–6).

Miracles and their message

In the Hebrew Bible, miracles invariably meant something and what God said was regularly identified with what God did. Indeed, in Hebrew the single word dabar could mean both a word and an action, and the two were very closely linked together in Hebrew thought. God's actions were in effect an extension of God's words, and what God does is essentially identical with what God says. So, for example, at the time of the exodus the remarkable deeds demonstrated by Moses before Pharaoh were not just wonders performed for effect, but were themselves perceived as the vehicle of God's message, living signs of the truth of God's words (Exodus 10:1–2).

This understanding was taken up and developed especially by the prophets, who often included mimetic actions as part of their message. Isaiah, for example, walked round Jerusalem naked and barefoot as an indication of his belief that Judah's allies would soon be destroyed by their enemies (Isaiah 20:1–6). Ezekiel drew a picture of a besieged city on a tile, as a sign of what was going to happen to the city of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4:1–3). Actions such as these were regarded as more than just symbols or illustrations: they were an essential aspect of the divine message through the prophets, and were closely bound up with the meaning of God's activities in the history of the nation. Significantly, John's Gospel regularly calls Jesus' miracles 'signs', an expression that links them to this kind of 'dynamic illustration' of a message, and like the 'signs' given by the prophets, the miracles were an essential and intrinsic part of Jesus' message. They were an extension in actions of the teaching given in the parables, and like that teaching they describe God's kingdom and present its challenge to those who witness them. When they are examined in this light, the miracles can readily be seen to be drawing attention to three aspects of the kingdom of God.

The arrival of the kingdom

When Jesus began his teaching ministry, the main content of his message was the declaration that ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ (Mark 1:15, KJV). Various meanings have been ascribed to the phrase ‘at hand’, depending on how Jesus’ eschatology is understood. But most scholars agree that at least one implication of the statement was that the kingdom was embodied in the ministry of Jesus himself. This comes out quite clearly in the miracle narratives, where the arrival of God’s kingdom is both declared and explained. On one occasion John the Baptist sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus whether he was indeed the Messiah who was to inaugurate the kingdom. Jesus told them to ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them’ (Matthew 11:4–5, RSV; Luke 7:22). This is another direct reference to the same messianic expectation that Jesus affirmed in his synagogue address at Nazareth: he was telling John that the miracles were a sign that the ancient promises were coming true.

John’s Gospel suggests that the miracles not only announced the arrival of the kingdom, but also showed Jesus to be its central figure. In the first miracle recorded in John (the changing of water into wine) Jesus ‘revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him’ (2:11). Later, the raising of Lazarus is ‘the means by which the Son of God will receive glory’ (11:4). Yet Jesus did not use miracles for personal gain, for the prologue to John points out that Jesus’ glory was not his own but was the glory of God, which he shared as God’s Son (1:14). The same theme occurs in other miracle stories, where Jesus requires those healed to praise God rather than himself (Luke 17:11–19; John 11:4). In the miracles, God’s power was demonstrated in such a way that those who witnessed them would realize that the kingdom, with all its promise of transformation, had already arrived.

The scope of the kingdom

The message of the miracles parallels Jesus’ explicit teaching in some very detailed ways, and may be understood as expressions of some key aspects of his

overall teaching about the kingdom.

The kingdom and the individual. In one of the temptations, Satan had claimed that he was the master of the world's kingdoms, and many people in the time of Jesus would have agreed with that (Matthew 4:8–10; Luke 4:5–7). As they looked at their own lives and the lives of other people, they saw suffering, illness, and death as evidence that their lives were influenced by the operation of evil forces in the world. It was commonly believed that disease was caused by the demonic members of an evil spiritual world operating in the natural, physical world. Sin and evil caused disease – not in the personal sense implied by those Pharisees who suggested that because a man was blind he and his family must be great sinners (John 9:1–12), but in a cosmic sense, so that human illness was seen as a part of the total fallenness of God's creation. An important part of Jesus' teaching was that people could be set free from all those forces that blighted their lives, whether that had come about through their inability to live up to their own highest ideals, or as a consequence of the evil directed towards them by other people or by circumstances. In the casting out of demons and in the other healing miracles, Jesus made this announcement in the most dramatic way possible. He also underlined another part of his teaching, for the miracles more often than not involved those who were the outcasts of society: lepers, whom no one would touch for fear of religious impurity (Matthew 8:1–4; Luke 17:11–19); a Roman centurion, whom many Jews must have hated (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10); those who were past helping themselves (Mark 5:21–43). God's generosity had no limits.

The kingdom and the world. If the healing miracles show Jesus releasing individuals from the power of evil, the 'nature miracles' show Jesus doing the same for the whole of creation. There was a widely held view that saw Satan as the ruler of the world, but Jesus had come to cast him out of every part of his dominion (John 12:31). So he 'rebuked' the wind and the waves in the same way as he 'rebuked' the demons that had such a harmful impact on the lives of people (Mark 4:39; 1:25). It was an important part of Jesus' message that he had come to save people in their whole environment, and

the nature miracles were intended to provide a striking declaration of the global scope of Jesus' work.

The kingdom in the future. The future dimension of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God is also reflected in the miracles. In Jewish thought the future kingdom was often pictured as a meal, and Jesus himself described it in terms of a banquet (Matthew 8:11; Luke 22:30; 14:15–24). The miraculous feedings of the 5,000 and of the 4,000 are an acting out of this picture, in which Jesus showed himself as God's Messiah feeding God's people (Matthew 14:13–21; 15:32–39; Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–10; Luke 9:10–17). According to one account of the feeding of the 5,000, the people were so impressed by what took place that they thought Jesus was inviting them to take up arms against the Romans and declare him to be their king there and then (John 6:14–15). There are also three instances in which Jesus restored to life people who were dead. These miracles are an expression in action of his teaching that his followers would have 'eternal life', by which they could anticipate in the present the future blessings of the messianic kingdom (Mark 5:21–43; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–44).

The challenge of the kingdom

In dealing with the parables, we noted that they were a way of inviting people to think through the full implications that God's kingdom might need to have for their own lives, and it was commented that without a willingness to engage with the message of the parables on their own terms as stories, the full meaning of many of them would remain hidden. The challenge of accepting God's values and standards is presented in similar terms in the miracle stories. Faith regularly features as an important element in Jesus' cures. On three occasions he says, 'Your faith has made you well' (Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 17:19), and according to Mark the absence of faith could be a hindrance to performing miracles (6:5). Indeed, without faith it was not possible to realize that the miracles were a sign of God at work, and unbelief led to the conclusion that Jesus was in league with Satan (Matthew 12:24). In the complex set of interactions between mind and

body, ‘faith’ is often an important part of a cure, and there is no intrinsic reason to suppose that Jesus, who ‘knew what was in everyone’ (John 2:23–25, NRSV) would not have understood that. But the faith of which the gospels speak went beyond a requirement merely to trust the healer. What Jesus demanded was not a predisposition to be healed, but an unconditional acceptance of the need for personal transformation, and a willingness to adopt a revolutionary worldview and a new style of living. To ask Jesus for healing was a sign of this faith, whose further implications were more fully spelled out in the parables. In this sense, the purpose of the miracles was not much different from the purpose of the parables: to those who were willing to trust God they could become a vehicle of revelation, while those whose minds were closed to such a possibility might easily dismiss them as trivialities.

Miracle stories in context

All the available evidence unambiguously supports the belief that Jesus was widely thought to have performed remarkable deeds of the sort mentioned in the gospels.

Jewish sources

Josephus says of Jesus:

About this time arose Jesus, a wise man, if indeed it be lawful to call him a man. For he was a doer of wonderful deeds, and a teacher of those who gladly receive the truth. He drew to himself many both of the Jews and of the Gentiles. He was the Christ; and when Pilate, on the indictment of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him at the first did not cease to do so, for he appeared to them again alive on the third day, the divine prophets having foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things about him. And even to this day the race of Christians, who are named from him, has not died out.

Antiquities of the Jews 18.3.3

This passage is not without its own difficulties, and scholars have different opinions as to how much of it was written by Josephus himself. The problem is that the passage says explicitly of Jesus that ‘he was the Christ’ (Messiah), but Josephus was not a Christian and it would have been remarkable for a Jew – even a liberal one like Josephus – to have made such an unequivocal statement.

Either this phrase was inserted into Josephus's work by a later Christian editor, or Josephus may originally have written that Jesus was 'called the Christ', and the text has subsequently been amended to make the reference more specific. Either way, that bit of the text is problematic. Despite that, however, most scholars are agreed on the authenticity of the rest of Josephus's description of Jesus, which contains the statement that he was 'a doer of wonderful deeds'.

From a later date, the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a) reports that Jesus was executed because he practised 'sorcery' and misled the people. This corresponds to indications in the gospels which suggest that the religious leaders had no quarrel with Jesus over the fact of his miraculous power to heal, but only over the source and meaning of it. It was not that people regarded the miracles as a hoax. Rather, they were not considered as evidence of God being at work. There were prophets, and false prophets – and Jesus was one of the latter. In Mark 3:22 certain scribes offered the opinion that Jesus found it so easy to expel demons because he was an agent of 'the chief of the demons' and that appears to have been a popular opinion at least among religious people. His opponents apparently had no reason to doubt the reality of what he was doing but dismissed it as being the work of 'Beelzebub' (Matthew 12:22–28; Luke 11:14–23).

Early Christian teaching

A secondary source of information is provided by the stories of the early church. One of the consistent elements of their message was that the promises of the Hebrew scriptures had been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in several places the ministry of Jesus is explicitly described in terms of miracle working. On the day of Pentecost, for example, Peter spoke of the 'mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through [Jesus]' (Acts 2:22, RSV). Again, in the sermon to Cornelius and his household, there is mention of how Jesus 'went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38). We need not enter here into the complex subject of the authenticity of these sermons attributed to Peter, for regardless of whether they come directly from him or

were the creations of Luke, the author of Acts, they still provide evidence that at an early stage Christians believed that Jesus had performed miracles, and that they expected an appeal to non-Christians on the basis of these miracles would not be rejected out of hand. If this indication is taken together with the evidence from Jewish sources, it seems clear that most people who knew anything at all about Jesus' ministry believed that he had done remarkable deeds, and this belief was quite independent of whether or not they were themselves Christians.

Hellenistic miracle stories

In literary form, the gospel narratives have similarities to the genre of Hellenistic biographies, some of which also tell stories of miracle-workers. This has sometimes raised the question of whether the gospel accounts might have been based on, if not actually derived from, these other accounts. Attention has been drawn in particular to alleged parallels between the gospel accounts and the stories of a first-century Cappadocian seer and wonder-worker mentioned in the Life of Apollonius attributed to Philostratus, a little-known author whose life probably straddled the second and third centuries. Similarities of expression and the use of the same literary conventions and language should hardly be surprising: there must only be so many ways that diseases and healing can be described. In fact, the ‘parallels’ sometimes drawn between Apollonius and Jesus favour the originality of the gospel traditions. Not only are the Hellenistic stories of a later date than the New Testament, but they were published with the express purpose of disputing the Christian claims about Jesus. If there is any question of ‘dependence’ by either account on the other, it could more easily be supposed that later writers consciously modelled their stories on the gospel accounts than the other way round.

Healers as heroes

It is a well-documented fact that as time goes on, remarkable deeds tend to be accredited to people who are highly regarded for other reasons. This tendency can be found in the legends that have gathered round the lives of many of the medieval saints, and it is undeniable that the same thing happened to the stories of Jesus. Many of the so-called ‘apocryphal gospels’ that were written in the second century are of a similar nature, and relate all sorts of bizarre miracle stories about Jesus. From time to time, certain miracle stories in Matthew and John have been compared with the stories in these apocryphal gospels, but on the whole there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the central miraculous element of the New Testament derives from such speculation. The date when the gospels were written is much closer to the events described than is usually

considered necessary for the development of such mythological accretions. The earliest traditions of the life of Jesus had some kind of fixed form as early as the late 40s, which was only fifteen years after his death, while the gospels themselves began to take final shape by about AD 65–70, which takes us only thirty-five years beyond the lifetime of Jesus. A conscious mythologizing process needs longer than that to develop, and at the time the gospels were being compiled there must have been many surviving eyewitnesses of the events they describe, who could no doubt have corrected any stories that were out of character with Jesus as they remembered him. There is also a striking difference between the miracle stories of the New Testament gospels and the stories told about Hellenistic 'divine men', or medieval saints, or even about Jesus himself as found in the apocryphal gospels. There is, for example, nothing in the New Testament to compare with the grotesque tale included in the Arabic Infancy Gospel, according to which Jesus produced three children out of some goats he found in an oven – for no other reason than to show it was possible. Even the story found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas about Jesus turning twelve clay birds into real sparrows on the sabbath is of quite a different character from the stories contained in the New Testament. Legendary tales of miracles are almost always concerned with the ostentatious display of special powers. But in the four gospels there is none of this, indeed they make it clear that Jesus' miracles were not ends in themselves. When the Pharisees asked Jesus to perform a miracle to satisfy their curiosity, he told them in no uncertain terms that this was quite alien to his work (Matthew 12:38–42; Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:29–32). It is also significant that Jesus is portrayed as a worker of miracles in even the very earliest strands of the gospel traditions. The source Q (which is explained in chapter 9) is generally thought to have been an early collection of Jesus' sayings, but this material also reports one miracle, the healing of the Roman centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10), and it also states that Jesus was in the habit of doing miracles. It is in Q that John's disciples are told to report the miracles they have seen (Matthew 11:1–19; Luke 7:18–35), and the cities of Galilee are condemned because they have not repented in spite of the repeated miracles done in them (Matthew 11:20–24; Luke 10:13–15).

Powers and temptations

It is often observed that in at least two of his temptations Jesus decisively rejected the performance of miracles. Given the opportunity to turn stones into bread and to throw himself from the temple without injury, he refused to do either (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Is it then likely that he would perform such a miracle as the feeding of the 5,000, which apparently resulted in the crowd trying to make him their king (John 6:1–15; Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17)? This is not such a significant question as it perhaps appears at first sight. Indeed, it only arises if Jesus is regarded first and foremost as a wonder-worker. The ancient world was full of magicians who practised their art as a means of displaying their own special powers and significance, but the whole tone of the gospel stories is quite different. The exercise of power as a route to wholeness is explicitly rejected, whether it be through military might or self-serving wonder-working. Jesus' miracles are characterized not by a quest for power, but by humble service of God and loving actions among other people. The miracles, like his teaching and preaching, were a declaration of God's generosity and an invitation to be a part of the new world of justice and love whose arrival they announced.

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO LIVE LIKE JESUS

Every society has its own foundational values and standards that inform the expectations of how its citizens will conduct their everyday life. These values are most often distilled into practical rules and regulations that provide stability and order and spell out how people are expected to behave in relation to others. Often these are simply the result of what experience has shown to be the best ways of doing things. In other cases, the regulation of life is overtly based on a system of religious beliefs. Occasionally, as in ancient Israel and some other nations of the time, there is a mixture of both. The relationship between inherited ways of doing things and the actual needs of people can easily become complex and problematic and by the time of Jesus a good number of the specific laws of the Hebrew scriptures had been rendered obsolete by cultural changes taking place in Jewish society. The Torah envisaged a fundamentally different form of social organization than was generally allowed for by the Roman empire, and that in itself required that its requirements be adapted and reinterpreted in order to address the new circumstances. The updating of the Law had been undertaken with some enthusiasm by the Pharisees, who saw the need for change if the traditional ways were to continue to be held in respect by people struggling with new challenges to their entire lifestyle. They had generally done a good job, and from all the available evidence it seems that they were highly regarded by other people, even if their stringent requirements were not always easy to observe.

Questioning the tradition

The Pharisees seem to have been recognized by most people as the moral conscience of their nation and the guardians of the ancient traditions, so it was inevitable that Jesus would find himself in frequent dialogue with them. Most such conversations seem to have ended up by exposing quite fundamental disagreements between the two, sometimes leading to direct public confrontation. Today's readers of the gospel stories might be forgiven for supposing that the Pharisees were personally responsible for all that was corrupt in Jewish society, and that Judaism was so far removed from the original intentions of the Old Testament faith that Jesus would of necessity be in conflict with it. That is how it sometimes looked to the Christians for whom the gospels were written in the second half of the first century, for in cities like Rome or Ephesus the Jewish communities often went out of their way to make life difficult for the church. It is not hard to understand the reasons for such antagonism, for within a very short time Judaism and Christianity were in effect competitors in the religious marketplace throughout the empire. But theologically, things were not so simple. Faithful Jews had a strong personal trust in God, and committed themselves to observance of the Torah as part of their response to what God had done in the life of their nation. They were not legalists, trying to blackmail God by their own moral goodness, but were honest and straightforward people with a high level of sincerity.

Jesus himself was happy to share in the worship of local synagogues on a regular basis, something that he presumably would not have done had he been fundamentally disillusioned with what went on there. It is perhaps surprising therefore that he should so soon have found himself locked in acrimonious conflict with the very people who might have been expected to be his natural allies. Ostensibly, it was arguments about religion and law that were at the root of all this. But disagreements on narrowly religious matters only became controversial because they also highlighted issues of social stratification within the community. The extent to which a person was able to observe the various religious rules had become a way of determining his or her intrinsic worth, and those who were scrupulous in keeping all the rules wanted little or nothing to do

with those whom they believed to be lax in their observance of the Law. The law-keepers tended to look down on those who were less scrupulous, regarding them in effect as second-class citizens and having as little as possible to do with those whom they considered spiritually corrupt and inferior.

Status and money

Some historic racial and economic issues also played a part in the moral stand-off between different segments of the community, with Samaritans and Galileans regarded as leading offenders in this respect. Centuries before, the Samaritans and Jews may have had some common ancestry, but by now they were implacably opposed to each other. So far as orthodox Jewish believers were concerned, they were no better than Gentiles, claiming that a temple they had built for themselves on Mount Gerizim was of equal status to the temple in Jerusalem. In some respects they were regarded as even worse than Gentiles, for they had been offered the chance to accept orthodox Judaism and had refused. The Galileans were likewise despised as mere opportunists, who were willing to side with anyone if it was to their advantage.

Sociologically, the religious people most opposed to Jesus were probably well-to-do town-dwellers, who were inclined to regard all others as inferior to themselves. When Jesus crossed swords with the cultural establishment in Jerusalem, certain Pharisees dismissed his followers with the comment that ‘This crowd is ignorant of the Law of Moses, so they are under God’s curse!’, adding for good measure that ‘no prophet ever comes from Galilee’ (John 7:49, 52, author’s translation). The writings of some later rabbis contain similar statements, declaring, for example, that a faithful believer ‘may not be the guest of one of the people of the land nor may he receive him as a guest in his own raiment’ (Desai 2.8–10). In dealing with such sweeping prohibitions and implied condemnation, it is hard to distinguish purely religious considerations from social and racial prejudices.

If this was the way country people were treated by city-dwellers, then it is no surprise that they were attracted to Jesus. They were not unspiritual by their own standards, but when judged by the criteria of religious purists they were always going to fall far short of full acceptance. They expected to be routinely disadvantaged and abused by those in positions of power, so it was a welcome surprise when Jesus turned the tables by treating them as people of value not

only to God but also to their fellow human beings. Others would find a place for them in the system if they came grovelling and broken, confessing their sins and seeking forgiveness (and they sometimes did: the famous Rabbi Akiba began life as one of the ‘people of the land’). But Jesus actively went out to mix with such people, to share their oppression – and in the process to offer them new understandings of God. They may have been the ‘wrong’ sort of people, but in his view they were the ones whom God would welcome. The short parable of the Pharisee and the tax gatherer said it all: ‘all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted’ (Luke 18:14, NRSV).

Jesus’ habit of mixing with unsuitable people was always going to be regarded as a snub to those who prioritized religious observance above everything else. But his insistence on challenging the establishment’s ways of doing things more directly highlights the extent to which he was genuinely out of sympathy with traditional approaches to spirituality. In one of the first stories in the Gospel of John, Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem, took a whip, and drove out the merchants and bankers (John 2:13–21). They had a right to be there, of course, though it was probably a recent concession granted to them not long before by the high priest Caiaphas as a means of undermining other markets that had been set up outside the temple walls on the Mount of Olives. Much temple worship involved the offering of animal sacrifices, which meant that city-dwellers would have to purchase animals when they got there, and since anything related to Rome was banned from the temple precincts – including its money – it was necessary first to obtain the religiously approved currency in order to make a purchase. In this context, the merchants selling animals and the money-changers were all providing an essential service. Jesus, however, chased them out, challenging a form of religiosity that would turn faith into a commodity to be bought, sold and controlled by religious institutions. The other gospels place this story towards the end of his ministry (Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48), but John puts it at the beginning because it highlighted so clearly the nature of the conflict between Jesus and the establishment. Jesus was convinced that anyone, no matter how ordinary, could have direct access to God, which meant that people must always come before procedures, regardless of how hallowed and venerable they might be. Even when a woman was caught in the act of committing adultery, Jesus refused to condemn her (which the Law required him to do), at the same time challenging her accusers with the words ‘Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her’

(John 8:1–11). For people who were socially excluded, valued by religious people at less than the birds and animals they offered in sacrifice, it was good news indeed to be told that ‘you are worth much more than many sparrows’ (Matthew 10:31).

People and priorities

Not only did Jesus challenge underlying attitudes about the nature of true spirituality, he also challenged some of the central provisions of the Law itself. The question of sabbath observance surfaces within the first two or three pages of Mark's Gospel, and is never far from the centre of the action thereafter. Jesus was roundly condemned by religious leaders when he insisted on healing people on the sabbath, or allowed his disciples to pick ears of grain as they walked through a cornfield (Mark 2:23–28, 3:1–6). This was more than an argument about social convention. Keeping the sabbath as a day of rest was enshrined in the Ten Commandments, which in turn claimed it went back to creation itself. The people were to rest on the seventh day because 'I, the Lord, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested' (Exodus 20:11). In Jesus' day, defining what this meant had become a major preoccupation of some religious experts. What does it mean to rest? Or, for that matter, for it to be the sabbath? Chapter 2 gave some examples of the ways in which such apparently simple questions were frequently addressed by the development of complicated rules that were designed to get around the requirements of the Law while appearing to uphold it. In effect it meant that those in the know were able to break the Law's rules while still theoretically observing them. In the light of such perverse ingenuity Jesus had good reason to ask why it would be considered wrong to heal someone on the sabbath (Mark 3:4). What was supposed to be a day of rest had all too often become an excuse for upper-class people to use the system to their own advantage, while finding fault with others whose understanding of it differed from their own. People were being strangled by their own rules. But Jesus reversed this, insisting that in God's way of looking at things, people come first and institutions second: 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27, NRSV).

Jesus adopted the same approach to the many complicated rituals attached to preparing and eating food. Centuries before, the high priest had been required to wash his hands before entering the tent of worship (Exodus 30:19; 40:13), but in Jesus' day many religious people had adopted this practice as part of everyday

life and were constantly washing their hands in order to demonstrate their religiosity. When all this was combined with the already complex dietary rules of the Torah, then even a simple thing like eating food had the potential to spark off lengthy debates. When Jesus was challenged about his own failure to keep these regulations, he refused to engage in discussion of the issue and dismissed rules of this sort out of hand as ‘human tradition’ (Mark 7:8, NRSV). As if to reinforce his indifference to such rituals, he went on to mention the things that, in his opinion, really set people in opposition to the divine standards, things like ‘greed, deceit, indecency, jealousy, slander, pride and folly’ (Mark 7:22, author’s translation). A person could appear exceedingly righteous by observing various minor rules and regulations, while side-stepping the central challenge of the Hebrew faith to ‘Love the Lord your God.… Love your neighbour as you love yourself’ (Mark 12:29–31).

Abolition or fulfilment?

There is just one passage in the Sermon on the Mount that challenges the view that Jesus had a negative opinion of the traditional ways. This is the saying in Matthew 5:17–18, ‘Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished’ (author’s translation). Several explanations of this statement have been proposed:

The simplest is to argue that this saying is not in fact original to Jesus, but has come into the sermon later and reflects a situation in the Jewish Christian churches for whom Matthew was writing his gospel. Matthew may have had in mind the chaos that had been caused in some churches as a result of misunderstanding Paul’s teaching about freedom from the restraint of the Law, and perhaps he wished to pre-empt any similar movement among the Christians he knew. This may sound like a drastic solution, but these verses are so out of character with the whole of the rest of Jesus’ teaching that many scholars believe it to be the best answer.

It has also been suggested that when Jesus speaks of ‘fulfilling the law’ he may have meant something rather different from what we imagine him to mean. The kingdom of God spoken about by Jesus is usually depicted as the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures, and though Old Testament spirituality had been overloaded with legalism, especially in the immediate post-exilic period, the central core of Judaism did emphasize the place of the Law not as a tiresome burden but as a delight and a joy. Could Jesus therefore have been referring not to what the Law had become to many people in his day but to its original intention which called for a person’s life to be right before God, perhaps along the lines of the advice offered by the prophet Micah: ‘what does the Lord require

of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' (6:8,NRSV).

It is also possible that what Jesus says about the Law's permanence is not to be taken literally. This could be an example of the kind of exaggerated hyperbole that he frequently used, and understood in that way it need be saying no more than that he saw his mission and message as being firmly grounded in the Old Testament revelation.

Whatever the explanation of that, there need be no doubt that Jesus challenged some fairly central aspects of religious practice in his day. The Torah certainly did lay down the death penalty for adultery; it certainly encouraged keeping the sabbath day; and it insisted that food should be prepared and eaten in certain specific ways. When Jesus apparently set aside all of these, and more, it was natural that those who were trying to remain faithful to the old traditions saw him simply as a heretic. The Pharisees might have been progressive in proposing ways that the ancient laws could apply in the new circumstances of the day, but Jesus seemed to be even more radical by questioning the underlying assumption that the inherited traditions had any continuing relevance. In terms of traditional religious practice, Jesus clearly was a heretic, for at the bottom of all these differences of opinion was a different theology with a fundamentally different picture of God. Jesus did not understand God as an angry deity requiring the observance of stringent regulations, but as a personal being with whom people could have a loving and empowering relationship based on justice, love, and generosity. We have seen the implications of all this in the parables that Jesus told, and – because Jesus had a holistic approach to spirituality – we have also already touched on some of the ethical consequences of his teaching. Those who claim to have a living relationship with God must also love their neighbours. They must care for the outcasts of society, and be concerned for one another's welfare. In Jesus' teaching, social concern follows on from personal spirituality as certainly and as naturally as night follows day.

Creative engagement

In all four gospels, Jesus is presented as someone who was more interested in people than in ideas. He was impatient with the theological hair-splitting of religious experts, and he did not care to engage much in abstract debates, nor was he particularly interested in intellectual knowledge for its own sake. His whole life was focused on people and their needs. The gospels provide many vivid images of Jesus at work among people – dancing with them, drinking with them, in casual conversations in fields and market places – but always with a view to bringing healing and renewal into their lives, as he pointed them to the new way of life represented by 'the kingdom of God'. The fact that Jesus engaged in so many 'ordinary' things marked him out as different from other religious teachers. But that was not his only attraction for people who were normally considered well beyond the pale of respectable religion. Any one of a large number of stories could be chosen to illustrate why Jesus was so captivating, but one in particular combines so many themes that it offers a comprehensive model of his approach. This is the story in John 4, of how Jesus met a woman by a well, in the most unpromising circumstances, how he invited her to discipleship, and how she not only accepted the challenge but went off to share it with others from her village.

One of the most surprising features of this whole encounter is the fact that Jesus was there at all. In terms of the conventions of the day, everything was out of joint. Women were considered incapable of receiving religious teaching, and even a relatively enlightened teacher like the second-century rabbi Jose ben Johanan who readily welcomed to his home the homeless and destitute still advised: 'Never talk with womankind… whoever talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna' (Aboth 1.5). It was unusual enough that a religious teacher like Jesus should take a woman seriously, but this one was a Samaritan, a member of a group who were hated more than most by Jewish people. In chapter 2 we discussed the identity of the Samaritans of New Testament times and proposed that they were most probably a relatively recent grouping that had emerged in the days just before the beginning of the Christian era, held together more by

religion than ethnicity. In any event, they were not highly regarded by devout Jews. They had their own religious and civil customs, and their own place of worship. Their land was located between Galilee and Judea, and to get from one to the other rigorous law-keepers would have made a long detour east of the Jordan river, rather than risk contamination by travelling through Samaria. But Jesus had no such inhibitions. He did not require that people should meet him on territory where only he felt safe, where he could be in control and could determine the outcome. Jesus went out to where people actually were, and willingly made himself weak and vulnerable in order to communicate.

The circumstances of this particular story show just how far Jesus was prepared to extend his own vulnerability. The well was on a remote hillside, it was a hot day, Jesus was desperately thirsty, and the woman was the only one with the means to get water. As the story unfolds it emerges that she had been married five times, and was living with a sixth man. It is easy to read this as evidence of a promiscuous lifestyle, but in a culture where adultery was punished by death it is highly unlikely that she would have managed to escape that quite so many times. It is more likely that she had been rejected by her husbands because she was unable to bear them children, and quite possibly the man she had ended up living with was a eunuch, himself an outcast because he was unable to father children. Whatever the truth, she had plenty of experience of abuse at the hands of men, and the last thing she wanted out in this remote spot was to be exploited yet again. Jesus knew he was speaking with a doubly disadvantaged person. So where did he begin? Right from the start, Jesus got alongside her, revealing his own need: he was desperately thirsty. More than that, it was a need that she could meet, and so he asked if she would share her water with him. This certainly placed him in a position of weakness, but by doing so he was able to affirm this woman as a person of value. Right away she recognized something unusual was happening: this was to be a two-way conversation. Moreover, here was a rabbi who would actually listen – to a woman, and a Samaritan – and who was prepared to ask questions, and pay attention to another person's answers. One of the secrets of Jesus' appeal to disadvantaged people was that he was a listener: he had time to hear what they wanted to say.

Not only that, but Jesus was prepared to follow the woman's own agenda. He did

not focus on communicating a set of abstract ideas, but on the questions the woman herself was asking. Jesus always addressed people at their point of need, and began where they were. In a fishing community by the Sea of Galilee, he talked about fish (Mark 1:16–20). With a rich man, the subject was money (Mark 10:17–22). With this woman at the well, the conversation was about water. Jesus was not primarily message-centred, but people-centred. Christians have often felt uncomfortable with the fact that Jesus' message was not expressed in the same terms for everyone, and it can come as a surprise to learn that only once did Jesus mention being 'born again' (John 3:3) or require a person to 'sell all you have' (Mark 10:21). Jesus knew his message would only be taken seriously if it was uniquely appropriate for each person and situation. As it happens, the woman did not immediately express her deepest needs to Jesus. Perhaps she was still too threatened by her previous experiences to do so. But Jesus had some unusual insights. An earlier passage in John states that 'he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone' (2:24–25, NRSV). The other gospels make similar claims. Luke frequently reports not only Jesus' openness to all sorts of outcasts of society (a Samaritan even makes it as one of the heroes of the parables in Luke 10:25–37), but also the fact that Jesus consciously relied on his own intuitive insights to apply his message to the concerns of his hearers. This is what happened here. Jesus had no prior knowledge of the woman's home circumstances, but when he revealed them to her in such detail, she knew for sure that he was 'a prophet' – maybe even 'the prophet' foretold by Moses.

Having moved the woman on in her understanding, Jesus was in a uniquely credible position from which to challenge her about discipleship. This was always Jesus' style. Though willingness to change and to live by the values of the kingdom were central to Jesus' message, he never put people down. Just as he had done with Peter by the shore of Galilee, so with this woman he never spoke of her inadequacies. She was already well aware of her own challenges, but precisely because Jesus gave her time and space to come to reflect on them in her own way, she was happy enough to go back to the village to share her experiences with her friends. For such a person – a woman and a Samaritan – this was indeed good news. Jesus' habit of taking seriously people who were despised by other religious teachers was one of the things that eventually brought him into serious conflict with the authorities. Not only did his teaching threaten some cherished religious ideas – as when he challenged strict sabbath-

keeping, or laid aside the traditional food laws – but his behaviour also undermined the accepted norms of social segregation, valuing outcasts with the same vigour with which he questioned the religious teachers. It was not difficult for people to believe that someone like this, who lifted them up and left them feeling affirmed and valued, must have a special place in the purposes of God.

Jesus as a teacher of wisdom

It is easy enough to see the outcome of Jesus' ethics. But why should God's people act like this? What is the basis for Jesus' ethical teaching, and how can it best be understood? It is of course not very easy to speak of Jesus' ethics in isolation from the rest of his teaching. All his teaching about God and the kingdom has an ethical dimension to it, while the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), which is generally regarded as the most comprehensive collection of ethical teachings in the gospels, is also full of theology. Nevertheless, this so-called 'sermon' does give us a good idea of the place of ethics in the new society that Jesus had come to inaugurate. Before looking at the actual content of the Sermon on the Mount, we first need to consider the best way of understanding what Jesus says in it. This is an important question, for it is obvious that the way Jesus gives his teaching here is quite different from the approach of today's ethics textbooks, and even quite different from the ways ordinary people might express the same ideas.

As a good teacher, Jesus naturally used forms of language and expression that would most easily inspire his audiences to put his teaching into practical operation in everyday life. In this respect, he stands in a long tradition of 'wisdom' teachers who were the practical philosophers of the ancient world, passing on to new generations the sort of lessons about life that would be taken for granted, and playing a part in the socialization of the young so they might easily fit into the cultural norms of their environment. Much of this information was the sort of everyday guidance that parents and grandparents would hand on to their children. But it had also been codified and preserved in a more formal way by schools of wisdom. The Wisdom of Ben Sirach (compiled in the second century BC) was one such collection that would probably have been known to Jesus' hearers, though that was just a more recent example of a tradition that is found in the Hebrew Bible in books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Songs. Jesus used the same language and imagery as these other sources of practical wisdom. But whereas their advice was intended to maintain social stability by affirming the accepted ways of thinking and behaving, Jesus was constantly inviting his hearers to go behind that and imagine a different way of

being. What if the inherited assumptions were wrong, and peace cannot actually be accomplished through violence, but only with justice? What if conventional understandings of Messiahship were fundamentally mistaken? What if children have greater spiritual insight than those who have been trained in theology? Wherever we look, Jesus' parables and miracles are an invitation to see the world differently, to view things the way God sees them – and to allow conventional wisdom to be subverted in the process. Jesus' teaching certainly challenged conventional norms, but that did not prevent him from adopting the same style of presentation as the traditional teachers of practical wisdom and some of these features can be found in his most distinctive teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount.

Much of the sermon is poetry, though not the sort of poetry with which most of today's readers of the gospels would be familiar. English poetry depends for its effect on rhyme or stress, whereas Hebrew poetry functioned with a correspondence of thought. There could be two basic styles depending on whether the correspondence was one of similarity or of difference. Take, for example, the following statement from Matthew 7:6, which can be arranged poetically as follows:

Do not give dogs what is holy;

and do not throw your pearls before swine…

(RSV)

This pattern is typical of Hebrew poetry, in which the second line repeats the thought of the first line, but using different imagery. This particular form is called 'synonymous parallelism' and there are many examples of it in the psalms and other poetic sections of the Hebrew Bible.

Another type of Hebrew poetry is known as ‘antithetical parallelism’, and again there is an example of this in Matthew 7:17:

Every healthy tree bears good fruit,

but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

(Author’s translation)

A similar lesson is being taught in each line, but the thought is expressed by the use of exactly opposite concepts. This technique also occurs frequently in the Old Testament.

Even the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13, NRSV) can be arranged poetically, as follows:

Our Father in heaven,	hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.	Your will be done,
on earth	as it is in heaven.
Give us this day	our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,	as we have also forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,	but rescue us from the evil one.

Another common feature of Jesus' teaching is the constant use of pictorial imagery. On occasion this can take the form of story, as in the parables; on other occasions it can be a single vivid illustration chosen from everyday life. This is quite different from the way people tend to make ethical statements in a culture dominated by propositional forms of expression, where ethics would be spoken of in an abstract way. Like the wisdom teachers of his day, Jesus never spoke of ethics in terms of theoretical principles. He always dealt with real-life situations. Instead of saying 'Materialism can be a hindrance to spiritual growth', his message was, 'No one can be a slave of two masters.… You cannot serve both God and money' (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus also had a tendency to state things in an exaggerated way, using hyperbole to make a point. For example, he said that it would be better for his disciples to pull their eyes out rather than to commit adultery, or better to cut their hands off than to displease God (Matthew 5:29). He was obviously not meaning to suggest that they should do either of those things literally, but he used this extravagant language to impress on his hearers the seriousness of his message.

In considering Jesus' teaching about life in the kingdom of God, it is important to look out for these different techniques, for recognizing the different forms will often help to illuminate exactly what Jesus was meaning to say.

God at the centre

In chapter 4 we noticed how Albert Schweitzer tried to isolate Jesus' moral teaching (as something of lasting value) from his teaching about the kingdom of God (as something that was mistaken and superseded). But this is a false dichotomy that too easily turns Jesus into a conformist and plays down the radical nature of his message. His ethical teaching cannot be separated from his teaching about God's kingdom and the demands and opportunities offered to those who wish to identify with God's way of doing things. It is very difficult to make sense of the Sermon on the Mount without an appreciation of this God-related foundation of all its precepts. All ethical systems have a basic premise from which everything else is developed. Jesus' ethical teaching is based on the declaration that the God who created all things and who acted in history in the experience of Israel can be known in a personal way as a God of justice, love, and generosity, and the behaviour of those who commit themselves to such knowing is then a natural outcome of their familiarity with God's ways. This was not as new as it can be made to seem, for the Hebrew scriptures had promoted two simple moral premises that were also basic to Jesus' teaching in the New Testament.

Human goodness and divine generosity

At the central part of the Holiness Code in the Old Testament is the statement, ‘You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Leviticus 19:2, NRSV). The ethical standards to which God’s people were expected to aspire were nothing less than a reflection of the character of God. Biblical morality was to take its models from divine conduct: people should behave as God behaves. In the experience of ancient Israel, one of the most characteristic of God’s activities had been the expression of an undeserved and unconditional love for them. The traditional national story told how Abraham had been called from Mesopotamia and given a new homeland not because of any moral or spiritual superiority that he may have possessed, but simply because God’s affection was centred on him. Israel subsequently emerged from the shattering experiences of the exodus and what followed, not because of their own moral perfection but simply through the care of a loving God, and it was on the basis of these undeserved acts of generosity that God had made certain demands of the people. This is made clear in the opening statement of the Ten Commandments: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage…’ (Exodus 20:2, RSV). This was the foundational principle on which all the other commandments were based: the people were exhorted to respond in love and obedience to what God had already done for them. The same pattern can be found elsewhere in the Torah: ‘You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today…’ (Deuteronomy 15:15, RSV). The ‘therefore’ was key, and forged a clear link between beliefs about the character of God and expectations about the behaviour of people. The New Testament continued this same pattern as the basis of ethical action. It is striking, for instance, that when Paul wanted to stop some individuals quarrelling in the church at Philippi, he appealed not to ordinary common sense but to this same notion that God’s behaviour should be the model for human behaviour (Philippians 2:1–11), highlighting the sacrifice that God made by being born into this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He then proceeded to make that the basis of a moral appeal to his readers: because Jesus had given up everything for them, they ought to be willing to sacrifice their own self-centredness in order to please him.

The basis of God's character in justice, love, and generosity is found throughout the Bible, not just in the teaching of Jesus, and has a number of important consequences for Christian behaviour.

It has given Christians a great sensitivity to the seriousness of injustice. When people are faced with a God who was willing to express unconditional love for the benefit of those who neither cared for nor respected God's standards, they recognize how different their own character is from the character of God. In the history of the Christian tradition, this consciousness of human failure to live up to God's ways has on occasion become a way of heaping guilt on people. But for Jesus, the recognition of injustice, or sin, was not limited to personal wrongdoing. It most typically did not begin with personal wrongdoing at all, but with the plight of those who were wronged by the unjust situations in which they found themselves. Time and again, Jesus met people whose lives had been blighted by the effects of sin, and instead of demanding that they be held personally accountable for their predicament he had compassion on them – recognizing that people frequently encounter the evil that is in the world not when they themselves do wrong, but when they are sinned-against. For Jesus, sin and injustice was a far bigger matter than personal wrongdoing. Following the insights of the traditional Hebrew story of the fall, he saw it as something that affected the entire cosmos, and required a correspondingly comprehensive approach in dealing with it. That is not to say that Jesus played down personal accountability. But in pointing people in a new direction, his message was more often an assurance that, with God's help, they could be empowered to take responsibility for their lives, rather than condemnation for the fact that their lives had been damaged by sin and its consequences.

Following on from that, Christian goodness has a numinous, other-worldly quality that regularly goes beyond the demands of common sense. The kind of self-giving generosity that Jesus saw as characteristic of God was repeatedly recommended as a basis for practical action. A rich person might be told to '… go, sell what you have, and give to the poor…' (Mark 10:21, RSV), while the disciples were encouraged to go two miles if the Roman troops forced them to carry their bags for one, and to 'turn the other cheek' and return good for evil

(Matthew 5:38–42). These things would be quite unreasonable, even absurd, on most conventional views of ethical responsibility. But when viewed in the light of God's generosity, they take on a different appearance and become the only possible response to such love.

Ultimately, therefore, the ethic that is recommended by Jesus is grounded in theology. These apparently ridiculous moral standards are to be adopted 'so that you may be true children of your Father in heaven… for if you love those who love you… what more are you doing than others?' (Matthew 5:45–47, author's translation). Being like God then becomes the prime motivation for disciples to follow Jesus' advice.

Goodness and community

The central theme of the Hebrew scriptures was the belief that God had acted decisively in the history of Israel and had entered into an intimate relationship with the people through the making of a covenant. This meant that the individual Israelite was never merely an individual, but a member of the people of God. As a result of this the goodness that God required was to be demonstrated not only in pious individuals but in the institutions of national life. Jesus laid the same emphasis on the importance of community, and all his teaching on the kingdom had both an individual and a corporate dimension to it. In replying to a question about spirituality, he used the book of Deuteronomy to affirm that he was concerned both with self-fulfilment and service of others, and neither of these should have priority over the other (Mark 12:28–34). In John's Gospel, which arguably has more emphasis than the others on the personal aspects of discipleship, he gave his followers a 'new commandment' that was to be the basis of the Christian community: 'that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one other' (John 13:34–35, author's translation). This emphasis on the importance of a just community at the heart of the kingdom of God was taken seriously as the church expanded into the cities of the Roman empire and became one of the hallmarks of Christian distinctiveness.

Believing and behaving

Jesus' teaching was intended as a way of life for those people who were prepared to subject their lives to God's rule. This is the point at which Jesus' ethic has most frequently been misunderstood. Those who claim to be able to accept the Sermon on the Mount but not the other claims made about Jesus in the New Testament have failed to recognize the essential character of Jesus' teaching. It is impossible to isolate his theology from his ethics, and to do so destroys the integrity of them both. In the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount Matthew informed his readers that it was the disciples who formed the audience for the sermon, and the various elements of it were directed to certain committed people, not to all and sundry. This was clearly understood by the earliest Christians. Indeed, as we shall see in chapters 9 and 10 of this book, the sermon was most likely compiled in the form it now has for the purpose of instructing new converts in the churches with which Matthew was associated in the first century. Both in the context of Jesus' life and in the context of the early church, the ethical teaching of the sermon was preceded by the communication and acceptance of the Christian message.

Following insights by C. H. Dodd, it is widely accepted that two strands of early Christian teaching can be distinguished in the New Testament, corresponding to the general pattern we have noticed in biblical ethics more generally. On the one hand there is the teaching that may be called kerygma – a Greek word that usually referred to the message proclaimed by a herald, which in a Christian context came to describe a declaration of what God had accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In terms of its function in New Testament ethics, it paralleled the central position occupied by the story of the call of Abraham and his descendants in the Hebrew scriptures. Now, through Jesus, God had acted not because of any moral value in those people who became disciples, but purely as an act of undeserved generosity, what Christians came to call 'grace'. In the same way as Israel had been summoned to obey the Law on the basis of God's loving actions, so too the early Christians could be given moral and spiritual exhortations because of what Jesus had accomplished for them in his life, death, and resurrection.

This moral advice has been called the didachē (‘exhortation’ or ‘teaching’, and to be distinguished from a second-century book of the same name). The connection between didachē and kerygma comes out especially clearly in some of the letters of Paul, which often deal with theological matters first and then make practical appeals to Christians in the light of those theological arguments. But the same pattern is also found in the various sayings of the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus encourages his disciples to forgive the wrong that others have done to them, it is because they themselves are receiving God’s forgiveness (Matthew 6:14–15). When they are called to love their enemies the reader naturally calls to mind the dynamic of God’s own undeserved love (Matthew 5:44), and even the missionary work of the disciples was to be carried out on the same basis: ‘You have received without paying, so give without being paid’ (Matthew 10:8, GNB).

Creative transformation

There has always been a tendency for readers of the Sermon on the Mount to try and understand it as a set of rules and regulations, a new law for Christians that would replace the old law of the Hebrew tradition. Some scholars believe that even Matthew himself considered it to be a ‘new law’ delivered by Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, comparable to the ‘old law’ delivered by Moses on Mount Sinai. But Jesus’ message was never intended to be a ‘law’ in any sense at all. The way Jesus expressed his teaching was quite different from the style in which law is typically formulated. Law needs to be based on a calculation regarding how the majority of people can reasonably be expected to behave. A law that cannot easily be kept is a poor law, and it is no use making a law to put pressure on people to become what they are not. Yet this, of course, is exactly what Jesus’ teaching does: it invites people to be different from how they would naturally be. It is therefore inadequate to regard it as a ‘new law’, because its requirements are not the kind that anyone could keep simply by ‘making the effort’. Throughout his ministry Jesus was in conflict with the Pharisees. They were concerned with actions that could be governed by rules. There was nothing actually wrong with that: not only was it a faithful reflection of the demands of the Hebrew Bible but it was also a way of organizing society that had been well tried and tested not only in ancient Israel but in many other social contexts. Jesus had a different approach to human behaviour. His primary concern was with people, and for him the secret of goodness was to be found not in obedience to rules, but in the spontaneous activities of a transformed character: ‘A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’ (Matthew 7:18, RSV).

Jesus’ teaching was not a law, but an ethic of freedom, which explains why he offered his followers illustrations of how life might be lived by reference to the values of God’s kingdom rather than burdening them with rules and regulations. Virtually none of his stories offered models that could be slavishly imitated, because Jesus always wanted to insist that the core of personal and social transformation is to be found in who people are in their innermost selves, rather than in their external actions. It was not that he regarded actions as unimportant, rather that he realized that the way people behave depends on their inner

motivation and self-understanding. Parables and miracles, not to mention his own lifestyle, offer glimpses of the way God operates, which is what we suggested the concept of ‘the kingdom’ really amounts to. But Jesus’ storytelling style of communication, opening up spaces in which people were invited to reflect for themselves on the appropriate way of doing things God’s way in any given set of circumstances ensured that it would always be incredibly difficult to turn his advice into a detailed set of moral prescriptions. Here, as in most other aspects of his teaching, Jesus provided his disciples with a compass from which they could get their bearings, rather than a route map which would provide them with specific directions. For those who like to have everything laid down in detail, Jesus will always remain a frustrating enigma, though others regularly find his open-ended approach empowering and inspirational. Either way, his refusal to legislate for human spirituality has ensured that people have found him a source of endless fascination over the last 2,000 years, and the trend looks set to continue.

CHAPTER 7

CRUCIFIXION

Why did Jesus die? Perhaps no other question about Jesus has ever been answered in so many different ways. Like many topics dealt with in this book, the sort of answer that is given usually depends on the way we ask the question. Josephus's opinion of Jesus has already been mentioned in chapter 5 in connection with the miracles, and in that same short passage he also offers the information that 'when Pilate heard him accused by the most highly respected men amongst us, he condemned him to be crucified' (Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3). His understanding was that Jesus' crucifixion was the outcome of political intrigue and collaboration between Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, and the religious establishment in Jerusalem. This is also clearly stated in the stories of Jesus' death in the gospels. But if we look at some other parts of the New Testament and ask that same question ('Why did Jesus die?'), we find a somewhat different emphasis in some of the answers. In his address on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said that Jesus was 'crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men', but qualified that by adding that he was 'delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23, RSV). Paul put it slightly differently again when explaining his most deeply held convictions to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3, NRSV). So even the New Testament answers the question in two different, though clearly complementary, ways. One answer is based on the story of the events that led to Jesus' crucifixion, while the other is rooted in the claims Jesus made about himself, and reflects the beliefs of the early church about his significance in God's plan for humanity. Jesus' death can be understood as a simple matter of history, but at the same time the very nature of his death, executed in the company of criminals, raises its own questions when placed alongside the claims made for him. For how could someone who was God's own representative have come to meet his end in such a way? Surely if Jesus was in some way divine, it would be a contradiction in terms for him to die at all, let alone on a cross and as a common criminal?

Opposition and conflict

All four gospels are agreed that right from the start Jesus' actions and words created divisions among those who met him. John explains this by saying that when Jesus came, God's light had come into the world, and this fact itself demanded that people make some kind of decision about him – to be with Jesus on God's side, or against him (John 3:16–21). Elsewhere in the gospel, Jesus himself makes similar statements (Matthew 6:24) and many stories depict him enjoying enormous popularity as a teacher and healer, while at the same time raising suspicion and outright opposition among both religious and civil authorities.

The Roman rulers of Palestine were always concerned about anyone who could command a following, because that could easily become a focus for revolt. Josephus says that is why Herod Antipas got rid of John the Baptist, and Jesus apparently attracted far bigger crowds than John ever did, and on one occasion a crowd of 5,000 wanted him to become their king and lead a revolt against the Romans (John 6:15). The gospels show Jesus repeatedly resisting such political power. But they also show that he had no such qualms about getting on the wrong side of the religious authorities. Right from the start, the crowds declared that his teaching was different from that of their own religious experts, and Jesus evidently accepted this. What is more, he had no hesitation in condemning the Pharisees and Sadducees outright, describing them as 'blind leaders of the blind' who had perverted and denied the word of God (Matthew 23:16–24). Though they appeared to be very holy, he said that deep down inside they were as rotten and worthless as a grave full of old bones! (Matthew 23:27). What is more, Jesus' criticism of these people appears to have been an intentional strategy and though he is portrayed spending a short time in more remote areas teaching his disciples, all the gospels suggest that there was a specific moment at which he decided the time had come to confront the religious authorities in Jerusalem itself. Different explanations have been given of this step.

The most traditional view is that Jesus realized the time for his death had come, and so he set himself to go to Jerusalem to fulfil what he believed to be God's will. This is clearly implied in the words addressed to the disciples in Luke 18:31, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished' (RSV).

The view of Albert Schweitzer, discussed in chapter 4, has also been influential, that is that Jesus made a deliberate gamble that did not pay off. He expected God to intervene to bring about the kingdom in a dramatic and more or less immediate way, and his visit to Jerusalem was an attempt to force God's hand. When God did not act, Jesus found himself unexpectedly dying on the cross.

Others have suggested that Jesus went to Jerusalem simply because he had been to most other parts of the country and he wanted to continue his teaching in the religious capital of the nation. The fact that he became involved with the political authorities there was just an unexpected and unfortunate miscarriage of justice.

Schweitzer's view has already been discussed. The other two explanations of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem probably both have some truth in them. No doubt Jesus did want to share his teaching with the people of Judea as well as those in other parts of Palestine (though according to John's Gospel, he may well have done so on more than one occasion before his final visit there). But by this stage of his ministry he must have realized the strength of the opposition he was stirring up among the religious leaders and known that a visit to Jerusalem was bound to bring him into direct confrontation with them. Either way, if there had previously been any doubt as to who Jesus was claiming to be, his entry into the city of Jerusalem made it plain, for the manner of his arrival brought to a focus several underlying messianic themes in his lifestyle and teaching. In effect, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a way that amounted to an open declaration that he was the Messiah. He came on an ass, in accordance with a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9, and the crowd acclaimed him as their king entering his capital city. Immediately after this he went to the temple, the place from where the Messiah was popularly

expected to begin the task of expelling Gentiles from Jerusalem (Mark 11:10; John 12:12–19). Jesus turned that expectation on its head by making a symbolic attempt to restore to them the only court of the temple in which they were allowed to worship, and in the process banished the Jewish bankers who had turned it into a place of business (Mark 11:15–17). Jesus obviously knew what he was doing, and he can hardly have been surprised to discover that the religious leaders soon put a price on his head. He does not even appear to have been surprised when one of his own followers, Judas Iscariot, picked up the money offered by the high priests (Mark 14:43–52), and he found himself betrayed by a disciple, arrested, and put on trial for his life.

The Last Supper

Immediately before his betrayal by Judas, all four gospels describe how Jesus hosted his disciples in a room loaned by a friend in Jerusalem in an event that we know as the Last Supper (Matthew 26:20–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–39; John 13:1–30). The earliest account of this meal is actually found in the writings of Paul (1 Corinthians 11:23–26) rather than the gospels, while John's Gospel gives a more extensive account of some aspects of the meal and includes the story (not mentioned by the others) of Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1–17:26). At the same time, John omits to mention the central feature of the other accounts, in which Jesus began with the traditional Jewish custom of giving thanks to God for the meal, but then distributed the bread and wine that were on the table and told his disciples that this was his body and blood, which would constitute a 'new covenant' for them whenever they met. The idea of a covenant would have been familiar to them already, not least at this particular season when the whole nation was preparing to celebrate one of the most important religious festivals of the year, the Passover, which recalled the inauguration of God's 'covenant' with their forebears. Its origins were to be found in the events of the exodus centuries earlier when the Hebrew families had been delivered from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12–23). Ever since then they had regarded themselves as 'the people of the covenant', and 'the covenant' was a shorthand way of referring to that whole relationship between God and people.

When Jesus compared his own impending death to the inauguration of a 'new covenant', he was suggesting to his disciples that through him God was performing a new act of deliverance, and that a similar promise of loyalty and devotion would be required of those who would share in its benefits. God's new kingdom makes demands of those who would be part of it, and Paul added that Christians should repeat this meal regularly as an ongoing reminder of the fact that their new life of freedom was made possible by Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit. Because of that, they owe him their unfailing loyalty and obedience. Paul, of course, was not intending to give an historical account of the Last Supper and his main intention was to emphasize that the Eucharist (as it came to be called) was a continuing reminder to

Christians of how much they owe to God. But in the case of the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, the matter is much more complex. Since they were clearly intending to give some sort of historical account of the Last Supper, it is legitimate to ask historical questions of them and the most important question is whether the Last Supper was a celebration of the Jewish Passover, or whether Jesus was observing some other kind of feast with his disciples.

Passover or informal meal?

The relevance of this question will emerge in the course of the discussion, which in turn resolves itself into two further questions. The first is whether Jesus' actions at the Last Supper suggest that he was observing the Passover with his disciples. Within the gospel stories it is possible to find arguments both for and against the idea that Jesus was observing the Jewish Passover. The following facts seem to favour the view that it was a Passover meal:

The Last Supper took place in Jerusalem, and not at Bethany where Jesus was staying at the time (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10). With growing opposition from the religious leaders, this can hardly have been a sensible time for Jesus to make unnecessary excursions into Jerusalem. But if he was intending to share in the Passover Festival, he needed to do so since the Passover feast could only be eaten within the walls of the city. This could also explain the emphasis on the disciples' concern to find a room in a suitably located house (Matthew 26:17–19; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–13).

According to John 13:23–25, Jesus and the disciples took their meal reclining on couches. This was not invariably the Jewish style, but it was obligatory at the celebration of the Passover. The instructions for celebrating Passover (the Passover Haggadah) say: 'On all other nights we eat and drink either sitting or reclining, but on this night we all recline.' The Mishnah adds that even the poorest person in Israel must not eat the Passover feast except while reclining (Pes. 10:1).

The meal took place at night. This was also a distinctive custom associated with the Passover. The usual custom was to eat the main meal of the day in the late afternoon. But the Passover was always at night, the time when the events it commemorated had taken place.

The dipping of pieces of food into a sauce (Mark 14:20; John 13:26) was definitely a custom used only at the Passover. The Passover Haggadah does not refer to bread being served in this way, but it does say: ‘all other nights we do not dip… even once, but on this night twice.’

The disciples sang a hymn before they left the room (Mark 14:26). The singing of the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113–18) was a distinctive feature that marked the end of the Passover meal.

Despite all these similarities between the Last Supper and the Passover, however, there are other factors suggesting that perhaps the Last Supper was not a regular Passover feast:

It is unlikely that Jesus would have been judged, condemned, and crucified in the middle of such an important feast as the Passover. In particular, it is unlikely that a Roman governor would have been so foolish as to take the risk involved in the public execution of a popular figure at a time when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims. To have done so would have defiled the day of the great festival, and could easily have sparked off a riot among the people.

It would have been against Passover laws for Jesus to be tried in the middle of a festival. All forms of work were prohibited on the Passover, and that included the work of the Sanhedrin. In addition, religious leaders would have risked ritual defilement by having anything to do with Pilate at this time (John 18:28). The whole business of the trials, and especially the element of urgency about them, is better explained if the Passover was to begin shortly than if it was already taking place.

A number of circumstantial details do not easily fit with the assumption that Jesus was observing the Passover. There is, for example, no mention of a lamb, though that was the single most important ingredient of the traditional Passover meal. It would also have been surprising to find Simon of Cyrene coming in from the fields at the height of such an important festival when work was strictly forbidden (Mark 15:21). It is also surely significant that the earliest Christians observed the Lord's Supper once a week and not annually, as they may have been expected to do had it originally been a Passover celebration. Taken by themselves small details like this would not prove very much, though when considered along with the other evidence they can be given some weight in the argument.

Faced with these apparently conflicting pieces of evidence, equally reputable scholars have reached different conclusions. Most have decided that, on balance, Jesus was actually keeping the Jewish Passover, though a significant minority have argued just as strongly that he was not. They suggest that what he was celebrating was a Kiddush, a type of feast with which committed believers would often prepare for the beginning of the weekly sabbath. It has also been understood as a feast of a more general nature known as a Haburah. Such feasts are well-known in later Judaism, and still form a part of traditional Jewish observances, but there is little evidence to show that they existed at the time of Jesus, and even less to show what may have taken place at them.

Judged purely on the basis of the evidence reviewed so far, there is much to be said on each side of the argument. But the really awkward questions begin with the gospels themselves, for three of them say quite definitely that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, even though not every detail of their description of the meal fits in with this assumption (Matthew 26:18; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:15). On the other hand, John says equally clearly that the Last Supper was not the Passover, but took place on the day before the Jewish festival – yet here also, not every part of his description of the occasion matches that statement (John 13:1; 18:28). At one time, it would have been easy to solve this problem by assuming that John, in particular, made a mistake in his story. Some scholars would still take that approach today, but it is now generally recognized as being too easy a solution, and even if John's Gospel was (as most think) one of the latest books of

the New Testament to be written, it is by no means a later fabrication of the life and teachings of Jesus. On the contrary, though the fourth gospel presents its own challenges in interpretation, the accounts preserved by John have every appearance of being based on authentic, reliable, and early traditions.

In order to grasp the precise nature of the difficulty, some knowledge is necessary of the way time was understood and calculated. Ancient Jewish chronology is notoriously difficult to understand, and in this case the matter is complicated by the fact that the Jewish day began at sunset, whereas the Roman day began at midnight. So, for example, while for the sake of convenience the weekly Jewish sabbath might be referred to as Saturday, it actually lasts from sunset on Friday evening until sunset the next day (Saturday). All the gospels agree that Jesus was crucified on a Friday afternoon, and his empty tomb was discovered on the Sunday morning. In between this was the sabbath, which was always a holy day, but on this particular week the Passover was also being celebrated, and this was an even more holy day. Putting this calendrical information alongside what is reported in the gospels, it seems that the synoptic writers thought that the Friday was the Passover Festival, whereas John believed that the Passover fell on the sabbath in that particular year. On this understanding, there is no problem with the statements made about Jesus: the difficulty rather is concerned with the chronology of these various religious festivals. This is one of those matters on which caution is probably the wisest course. There is certainly no one answer that could claim to be the generally accepted consensus of opinion. But one possible way of understanding the awkward distinction between John and the other gospels is to suppose that the two traditions were using different calendars, and that what was in one calendar the day of the Passover would be another day in a different calendar.

Nowadays we would find it impossible to believe that there could be different opinions about something as basic as the date, but in the context of the time this is not as far-fetched as it sounds. There was constant speculation on such matters, and the existence of the various sectarian movements within first-century Judaism was to a large extent related to differing opinions on this very subject. One of the most striking differences between the Qumrân community and the Pharisees, for example, was on the question of their religious calendar.

The mainstream Jewish calendar was based on calculations related to the movements of the moon, whereas the Qumrân people appear to have used another calendar as well, based on calculations about the movements of the sun. This same calendar features in the Book of Jubilees, and according to it the Passover meal was always on the day that began on the Tuesday evening. If Jesus used this same calendar, then he could have celebrated a real Passover with his disciples on the Tuesday evening, but still have been crucified as the official Passover was about to begin on the Friday evening. This ingenious solution, however, leaves unanswered a number of vital questions:

There is no evidence that Jesus followed anything other than the official calendar. He appears to have operated in the mainstream of Judaism rather than in any sectarian movements, and is often depicted taking part in the regular worship of the synagogue. If, as John suggests, he had occasionally attended the great temple-based festivals in Jerusalem, it would be more natural to suppose that he kept the same calendar as the Jerusalem authorities, otherwise he would not have been there at the same times as everyone else (John 7:1–39). In addition, we know that Jesus was often in conflict with the Pharisees about the observance of religious festivals, and was regularly accused of doing things that were not allowed on the sabbath – yet he never claimed that he did them because he used a different calendar but instead explained his actions by reference to the fact that he believed himself to be ‘Lord even of the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:28).

The Passover lambs had to be ritually slaughtered in the temple, and this would obviously be done according to the official calendar. It is therefore difficult to see how the disciples could have had a lamb available in Jerusalem on the Tuesday evening – yet without the lamb, there could be no Passover meal.

This alternative calendar would mean that Jesus was held in custody for two days before his crucifixion, which is difficult to reconcile with the unanimous testimony of all four gospels that the trials took place in a hurry so that Jesus could be condemned and executed before the beginning of the sabbath.

Despite its attractions, this theory rests on rather shaky foundations, though it is not impossible to imagine that new evidence to strengthen it could yet be discovered in the Qumrân texts or elsewhere. In the present state of our knowledge, however, it is difficult to accept it as a sufficient explanation of the difference between the gospels. A more likely possibility is that these indications of dates were inserted into the narratives by their respective authors consulting the calendar at the time and place when they were actually writing. John's Gospel was written from the perspective of the Jews of Palestine: could it be that on the year in question, they celebrated the Passover on the sabbath, while Mark (followed by Matthew and Luke) followed the customs of the Jews of the Dispersion, and on their reckoning the Passover was held on the Friday in the year that Jesus died? Many more speculative theories have been advanced from time to time, all with something to commend them. Perhaps this is one of those topics on which the wisest approach is to admit that we simply do not know for certain, though the explanation is highly likely to be related to calendrical confusion. In any case, this one detail should not be allowed to hide the fact that all four gospels are in complete agreement on everything else. Nor can it be concluded that because there is no obvious answer at present, that means there is no answer. But if an explanation lies in the arcane speculations about the calculation of dates then it will be a long and tedious process before a widely acceptable answer is found.

A new covenant

In any case, we will never find a full explanation of the Last Supper if we only ask what sort of Jewish feast Jesus was keeping. What Jesus was doing at the Last Supper matches many traditional customs. But the precise nature of what he was doing cannot be fitted exactly into any specific occasion in the Jewish religious calendar. It seems unlikely, for the reasons already given, that the disciples were celebrating the Jewish Passover, though at the same time it seems obvious that their Last Supper with Jesus followed fairly closely the formal setting of the Passover meal. Perhaps a little more room should be allowed for the creative originality of Jesus himself. In the nature of things the Passover lamb was absent, but in this supper that was of little importance. By this point, Jesus had a pretty clear idea of what would happen next, and was bold enough to claim that God was already providing a lamb, and he was here offering himself in symbol to his disciples as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). It was no coincidence that he was crucified at the very same time as the symbols of God's past deliverance were being sacrificed in the temple courts.

At the same time, there was a strong sense that Jesus' death was not to be just a re-interpretation of an ancient ritual, but would usher in something quite different and revolutionary, that would both sum up and supersede the events associated with the first Passover. This was the inauguration of the kingdom of God and in the Last Supper, surrounded by those who would become the nucleus of this new way of being, Jesus was offering himself for their freedom in the bread and the wine. This is why these things became within the church the external signs of the new way of being that Jesus had announced, and into which disciples were incorporated through his death, resurrection, and the continuing presence of his Spirit.

Jesus on trial

The gospels appear to report two different trials of Jesus. One was before the religious authorities, when of course he was charged with a religious offence and the other before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, where he was charged with a political offence. It is widely believed that the religious authorities had no power to carry out a death sentence themselves, which was why they needed the support of the Romans, though there are different opinions about this, and also about the precise relationship of the different trials to one another. It certainly makes good sense to suppose that Jesus' enemies would make much of the charge of blasphemy before a religious court, and then change to a charge of political insurrection as the one most likely to secure some action by the civil authorities.

Jews and Romans

The stories of Jesus' trials are deceptively straightforward, but they raise some vital questions that have repercussions even now in the twenty-first century. In particular, who was it who actually conspired to bring about the death of Jesus – and what was the precise relationship between the various religious leaders who feature in the gospel stories and the Roman Pontius Pilate who eventually condemned Jesus? That may sound like the sort of historical conundrum that would interest only a minority of people. But in reality it has been one of the hottest subjects in discussion of Jesus' death for many generations. The belief that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus has led to the most horrific persecution of that nation. Even the Shoah (or Holocaust) can, in some respects, be traced back to religious roots. Bible scholars in pre-war Germany regularly portrayed Judaism as a dead and lifeless faith designed to keep people in bondage rather than setting them free to live life to the full, and that opinion helped to fuel the fires of anti-Semitism that were already sweeping through Europe in the 1930s. The fact that Jewish leaders were in the vanguard of the opposition to Jesus merely fanned the flames to even greater intensity.

Accusations and process

John’s Gospel depicts the trial beginning in the house of Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest (18:12–14). Annas had no official position, but as a former high priest and a leading Sadducee he would have had considerable influence. Perhaps this was an informal investigation held to formulate proper charges. The supreme religious court of seventy members, the Sanhedrin, could not officially meet until daylight, but as soon as it was morning the members were summoned to Caiaphas’s house (Mark 14:53–15:1; John 18:15–27). After Jesus had refused to answer questions about his teaching, and the witnesses had failed to agree in their evidence, Jesus was asked a direct question under oath: ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ To this he not only replied ‘I am’, but added ‘and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven’ (Mark 14:61–62, NKJV). This confession apparently convinced the Sanhedrin that Jesus was guilty, though it is unlikely that all its members would have been opposed to what Jesus stood for. Many of them would certainly have welcomed a messianic leader who would strike a blow against the Romans, and at least one member (Joseph of Arimathea) must have been a sympathizer as he subsequently arranged for Jesus’ body to be interred in his own tomb (Mark 15:42–47). But for others, Jesus had already shown that he was ready to challenge too many of their inherited religious traditions, including not only ritual matters but even central institutions such as the sabbath. By the time Jesus was brought to trial, the ultimate outcome was a foregone conclusion no matter what was said.

The next step was to bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate, who by now was the Roman governor of Judea. Here the accusation of blasphemy was dropped, for a charge based on religious scruples would never have appealed to a Roman official. It appears that Jesus’ accusers first tried to get Pilate to confirm their own sentence without stating a charge at all, but when Pilate then insisted on a charge, three accusations were made:

Jesus was perverting the Jewish nation. The religious leaders, of course, thought of this in terms of perverting the nation from their own brand of Judaism. But they no doubt wanted Pilate to think of it in terms of undermining the nation's loyalty to the emperor.

Jesus had forbidden the payment of taxes. This was the usual charge made against Zealots.

Jesus had claimed the title 'king' – something that only the Roman senate could legitimately give.

After Pilate had interviewed Jesus, he realized that though he may have upset the sensitivities of some religious leaders, he was scarcely guilty of any crime under Roman law. If he had claimed to be a king, he was obviously not the kind who could rob Caesar of his power (Luke 23:13–16). But Pilate also realized that to upset the Jerusalem establishment would disturb the delicate balance of power between Jews and Romans, and whatever he did he was going to be in a no-win situation. He could acquit Jesus and risk a riot – and undermine his own position in the process – or he could condemn Jesus and live with the knowledge that he had sent an innocent person to his death. When the crowd told him that 'If you let this man go you are no friend of Caesar' (John 19:12, NCV), his mind was made up as the last thing he needed was a bad report of his conduct getting back to Rome.

In point of fact, the New Testament nowhere suggests that either Jews or Romans should carry all the blame, in any absolute sense. At one time, it can seem as if 'the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders' were instrumental in Jesus' death (Acts 13:27, NRSV), while at another it is attributed to Judas or Pilate, or indeed to some extra-terrestrial reality (1 Corinthians 2:7–8). The fact

is that for the earliest Christians the precise identity of the players in this drama was not all that important, though it is absolutely clear that the death of Jesus was not an ethnic issue, and the arguments about his teaching did not have a racial basis, but were concerned with the sort of religious attitudes that have surfaced frequently in both religious and non-religious societies. The kind of bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance that Jesus opposed is by no means an exclusively Jewish trait, and never has been. The sort of goodness represented by Jesus makes us all uncomfortable, and many others would have reacted to him in exactly the same way as some of his contemporaries did.

In addition to such general issues, though, there has been a good deal of discussion about historical issues related to the trials of Jesus. Can it be claimed that there ever was a Jewish trial at all, in the sense of a formal legal procedure conducted by a group such as the Sanhedrin? This discussion is hampered by the absence of any contemporary evidence about Jewish customs and practice in the first century. The only certain knowledge is contained in the Mishnah, which dates in its present form from about AD 200. This contains traditions that are much earlier than the time when it was written down, but it is impossible to know how far these regulations were in force at the time of Jesus. By these later standards, a trial such as that which the gospels describe would certainly have been very irregular, with leading members of the Sanhedrin being the prosecutors as well as the judges, having already been involved in the plot to have Jesus arrested. The trial began with no definite charges, and no evidence was called for the defence even though the key prosecution witnesses contradicted each other. Moreover, two very important rules of later Jewish law were ignored completely. These laid down that twenty-four hours had to elapse between a death sentence being passed and then carried out; and that a trial should not be held on the day before the sabbath.

Because of these irregularities many Jewish writers – often motivated by their understandable concern to challenge the anti-Semitic propaganda that regarded them as Christ-killers – have insisted that there is no historical truth in the gospel narratives at this point. In terms of the social dynamic of Palestinian society at this time, however, it is hard to find convincing reasons for regarding this trial as fiction. Though the Jews had little real influence over their political destiny, their

leaders were always eager to apply their own law whenever they could, as a psychological prop to nationalist aspirations and a useful means of gaining the support of the mass of the people. A death sentence passed on Jesus under traditional law by a religious court would certainly have influenced ordinary people against him, and it might even have been expected to exert a certain moral pressure on the Roman judge who was to have the final word. It is not very likely that such a trial would have been as illegal as it can be made to appear if compared with the later rules of the Mishnah. Quite apart from the doubt over whether these procedural regulations were in operation at the time, it is especially significant that, of all the charges made by the first Christians against the religious establishment, they never accused them of breaking the law in order to have Jesus executed. In addition, there is no reason to believe that the members of the Sanhedrin were anything other than people of high moral ideals, some of whom are known to have had considerable sympathy with Jesus' message. Perhaps a majority of them met with their minds already made up, and to that extent were unable to give Jesus a fair hearing. But even these people were genuinely convinced that their view of things was right, and that Jesus was nothing but a messianic pretender and a trouble-maker.

Crucifixion

There is plenty of documentary evidence to show that the Romans regularly used crucifixion as punishment for criminals throughout their empire, though surprisingly little is known about the way it was carried out. Those who were crucified were generally never buried but their bodies were simply left hanging to be eaten by animals or to rot in the sun. Only one set of remains of a man crucified in Palestine has been discovered, consisting of bones from an ossuary that were preserved because the individual concerned (Yehohanan, son of Hagakol) had friends who cared enough to give him a decent burial. These bones show that his feet were probably nailed one either side of the cross rather than both feet on the front as artists have conventionally depicted it and fragments of wood still adhering to the nails show that his cross was made of olive wood. This also raises the intriguing possibility that he may not have been nailed to a cross at all, but onto an actual olive tree. If so, that would help to explain some details in relation to the death of Jesus, such as the easy access that others had to offer him drink (John 19:28–29). Olive trees are low bushes, and anyone crucified on one would likely be at eye level to the bystanders – something that would not only heighten their awareness of the gruesome nature of this death, but would facilitate the sort of personal conversation that took place between Jesus, his mother, and the beloved disciple (John 19:25–27). It also raises the intriguing possibility that when Peter (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 1 Peter 2:24) and Paul (Acts 13:29; Galatians 3:13) referred to Jesus being crucified not on a cross but on ‘the tree’ they were reflecting early memories of those who were actually there.

It was a regular custom for victims to have a placard describing their offences, and in this instance the inscription read ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ No doubt that satisfied Jesus’ religious opponents, who could understand kingship in terms of a claim to be the Messiah, while the Romans for their part would be satisfied that Jesus was worthy of death as a revolutionary. None of this would be exceptional or noteworthy. Jesus died in the same way as thousands of other messianic claimants and Zealots and the only difference noted by the gospels is that his death took a little less time than was usual, only six

hours, intentionally expedited to appease the religious systems that had opposed him so effectively, for the sabbath day was fast approaching and in order to be ritually pure in time it was necessary for his accusers to see his body disposed of as fast as possible. In purely historical terms there is little more to be said about the crucifixion of Jesus. But for the earliest Christians, the real significance of this event went well beyond the apparently straightforward happenings of that day.

Then there is Pontius Pilate. He was the fifth Roman prefect of Judea, coming to power in AD 26 in succession to Valerius Gratus and ruling for ten years. His only claim to fame relates to his involvement in the death of Jesus. The Roman author Tacitus (Annals 15.44) only mentions him in this connection, though the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo both supply more information about his general disposition. They describe him as a brutal and callous man who cared little either for Jewish religious scruples or for common human values. A New Testament reference recalls an occasion when he ordered the death of certain Galileans, and 'mixed their own blood with their sacrifices' (Luke 13:1, author's translation). This was probably the time described by Josephus, when Pilate raided the temple treasury for cash to build an aqueduct, only to face demonstrations from crowds of outraged believers when he made a visit to Jerusalem, presumably for one of the festivals. In retaliation, Pilate sent his troops into the crowd in disguise and a considerable number were killed while he himself sat and watched the gory spectacle (Josephus, The Jewish War 2.10.4). This might explain why Antipas never had much time for Pilate (Luke 23:12), and it may have been sensitivity to this situation that led Pilate to send Jesus to him for trial. Pilate's cruelty and careless disregard for religious sensitivities eventually ended with him being recalled to Rome to give an account of himself though his rule was the second longest of all the procurators, which suggests he may well have been an efficient administrator. But the gospels present him as a weak man and an opportunist who condemned Jesus to death not out of any respect for the Jews, but only as a means of preserving his own reputation with the authorities back in Rome.

Reflecting on the death of Jesus

The first generation of Christians, like all Christians ever since, were convinced that Jesus' death on the cross had a meaning that affected not only their own experience, but also had consequences for the whole of the cosmos. Their starting point was the knowledge that their own lives had become meaningful in a new and fresh way because of what Jesus did on the cross. They expressed it in many different ways: some said their sins had been forgiven, others that they had found peace of mind, or that they had been reconciled to God. But all of them were convinced that what had happened to them as a result of Jesus' death was real, and was every bit as real as the fact that Jesus had died. Indeed, in one way they knew it better. For whereas their knowledge about Jesus' death came from hearing the reports of other people, each one of them had personally experienced this dynamic change in their own life.

But how could such a thing be explained in terms that other people would understand, and that would bear some relationship to the reality of what had actually taken place on the cross? The one thing that was clear from the outset was that this was not something that could easily be expressed in abstract, analytical terminology. If its meaning could be encapsulated in words at all, they would need to be symbolic and pictorial words, language that would use the familiar and ordinary to describe a reality that was quite extraordinary. In the effort to understand the multifaceted nature of Jesus' death, many different figures of speech were utilized. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul refers back to the events of the exodus from Egypt, and uses the language of sacrifice to compare the new life offered by Jesus with the new life that opened up to the ancient Israelites following their first Passover meal, when a lamb was sacrificed and eaten (Exodus 12:1–28). But he could also say that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Corinthians 15:3), while in 1 Timothy 2:6 it is said that Jesus 'gave himself a ransom for all' (NRSV), using imagery that would be familiar in the context of Roman society, where the payment of a ransom could secure freedom for a slave. Each of these statements, and many others, brings out some of the things the early Christians understood about Jesus' death. But in thinking about such statements, two things should never be forgotten:

They are all pictures, or analogies. Just as it was important not to press too literally the metaphors and images that were used in talking about Jesus' personal claims, so it is important to bear in mind the essentially illustrative nature of the language used in the New Testament to describe his death. Failure to do that can lead to absurdity, if the details of a particular analogy are used in ways that the early Christians never contemplated.

In pictorial terms, the theology of the New Testament can more usefully be compared to a wide-angle picture than to a close-up. Just as a big picture is made up of any number of different items, so the New Testament's explanation of Jesus' death consists of many different images. It is possible to consider certain parts separately and in greater detail than others, and in some circumstances it may be both necessary and legitimate to do so. But it is always important that the details are not isolated from their overall context as components in the bigger picture. Every one of the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe Jesus' death played an indispensable part in the early church's understanding of its meaning but not one of them by itself was ever believed to contain the whole truth. For that it is necessary to consider them all, and place them within the context of the entire experience and theological understanding of the early church.

Five particular images seem to be central to what the New Testament says about Jesus' death on the cross.

Battle

Metaphorically, the gospels can be understood as describing the whole of Jesus' life and ministry as a battle against those forces that might oppose God's will. Sometimes (as in the temptations) these forces can be imagined almost in a cosmic context as embodied in the figure of the tempter, Satan, who came to represent everything that stands against the values of God's kingdom. At other times the forces opposing God are more immediate and personal, and on occasion can even be identified with Jesus' own closest friends (Peter, in Mark 8:33). Jesus' miracles were often described in terms of releasing people from the power of evil, while Jesus appears to have regarded his whole life as an effort to win a victory over the kind of negative influences represented by unjust suffering, wrongdoing, and death. Paul regarded the cross as God's final and decisive struggle against the powers of evil, believing that in spite of Jesus' apparent defeat, his resurrection had actually signalled a complete victory over sin and death (Colossians 2:8–15). The same view is found in the gospels (John 12:31), and the image of the cross as a battle with the forces of evil is one that has regularly appeared in the Christian tradition ever since, not least in its Easter hymns.

To understand Jesus' death only in these terms leaves unanswered a very obvious question. For if Jesus triumphed over sin in his cross and resurrection, why is there still so much evil in the world today? A popular image used to explain that is derived from the typical events of warfare, in which one major battle might decisively hand victory to one side even though lesser skirmishes might continue for some time and the war will not finally come to an end until everything is peaceful. On this analogy, the day of Jesus' crucifixion can be thought of as the day of the decisive victory against violence, though the final end of hostilities is still in the future, when evil is eventually banished and the new world order comes to fulfilment. This is by no means the only thing the New Testament says about the problem of evil, but it is a partial answer to it when Jesus' death is understood in terms of a battle. Of course, using military terminology to describe Jesus offers a very one-sided image, not least because he went out of his way to redefine messiahship in rather different terms. His core message was that

violence, even for allegedly good reasons, was not the way to establish peace. God's way of doing things is not about power and control, but offers a different way of being that is characterized by justice, love, and generosity. Nevertheless, in a world dominated by military force, this was an obvious metaphor for the early Christians to adopt if for no other reason than its ready accessibility. But it has often been given more importance than it deserves as its essentially metaphorical use has been extended in ways that have taken it well beyond anything it can originally have been intended to convey. Later generations of Christians who were themselves empire-builders and conquerors rather liked the idea that God was also a war-monger, even though that impression can only be sustained by misunderstanding the nature of metaphor and analogy, and deliberately ignoring the teaching of Jesus as presented in the gospels. Doing so has led to some of the worst atrocities ever committed by Christians, from the medieval Crusades against the Muslim world to the colonialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not to mention the bellicose language of more recent politicians who like to see the world in dualistic terms of 'us' versus 'them'.

Example

Many well-known Christian hymns describe Jesus' death as an example, reflecting the belief that on the cross Jesus revealed God's love for the world. Jesus himself never spoke of the cross as a revelation of God's love, but Paul and John both did (Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:10). They also suggested that as Christians consider Jesus' sufferings, they ought to be ready to endure such sufferings themselves. The writer of 1 Peter used this as a powerful motivation to encourage Christians who were being persecuted for their beliefs: '… to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps' (1 Peter 2:21, NRSV). This notion is a lot easier to understand, for there are many examples of people who have selflessly given their lives for a good cause. Others admire and respect them, and may even be moved to take up the cause themselves. This particular image has been especially inspirational to those who suffer, either for their faith or from the effects of economic and political oppression. Many Christians in the Global South find that it speaks to them in a way that the military image of power never can, reminding them that the Jesus who found the most acceptance among the poor and the marginalized also died among the same people, at the hands of the rich and powerful. Again, this metaphor does not exhaust all that the New Testament wants to say about Jesus' death. The early Christians believed he was more than just an innocent man dying at the hands of his oppressors – and if it was in some sense God who was there on the cross, there is a correspondingly limited sense in which others can take up and share that experience.

Sacrifice

This was one of the most natural metaphors for people with a Jewish background. Animal sacrifice was widespread throughout religious contexts in the ancient world, as it still is in some cultures today, and sacrificial language is used to explain and comment on the death of Jesus throughout the New Testament. When John the Baptist first saw Jesus he identified him as ‘the Lamb of God’ (John 1:29). Paul wrote of ‘Christ, our Passover lamb’ (1 Corinthians 5:7), while 1 Peter described Jesus as like ‘a lamb without blemish or spot’ (1:19, RSV), and the book of Hebrews went to extraordinary lengths to compare Jesus’ death with the sacrificial rituals of Judaism and to present it as in some way the fulfilment of them all. This image raises particular questions for today’s readers of the New Testament, largely because it is so alien to our experience of either religion or life.

The New Testament writers generally connect Jesus’ death as sacrifice with the consciousness that their sins had been forgiven, so the most obvious connection of this imagery is likely to be with the various sacrificial procedures of the Old Testament that were designed to procure forgiveness from sin. These ‘sin offerings’ are documented in Leviticus 5:17–19. There was also, however, the well-known event of the first Passover, at which the people of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt, and in which the sacrifice of a lamb played a significant part (Exodus 12). There was a more natural connection here, because Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples took place at Passover time, and the way this is reported implies that, at the very least, his crucifixion would be as great a turning-point in their own lives as the Passover had been in the experience of their forebears (Mark 14:22–25). There is no need to choose between these two somewhat different sacrificial images. When the New Testament describes Jesus’ death in terms of a lamb being sacrificed, either or both of them could be in view at different times. The lamb of the sin offering and the lamb of the Passover were each regarded as relevant images for the death of Jesus.

Relatively few people today have seen an animal sacrifice, even in those cultures

where it is still practised. The majority probably tends to think of it as a rather barbarous ritual from an uncivilized past. But in sacrificial contexts, its real importance is generally located not so much in the physical brutality as in what the action as a whole can be understood to represent or symbolize. Worship in ancient Israel was based on a strong concept of difference between ordinary people and God. This difference could be understood in both spatial and ethical terms. Spatially, 'uncleanness' disqualified people from dealing with the 'holiness' that was equated with religious shrines, so that only certain specially equipped people (usually priests) could touch, or even come into close contact with, the presence of God. Morally, 'sin' – whether deliberate or accidental wrongdoing – similarly disqualified a person from acceptance by God. Both forms of alienation could be dealt with by the offering of appropriate sacrifices. Not all sacrificial procedures were exactly the same, but a typical sacrifice might begin with the worshipper approaching the altar (representing God's presence) with the sacrifice, hand placed on the animal's head. This identified the worshipper with the animal, indicating that what happened physically and outwardly to the animal was understood to be happening to the worshipper inwardly and spiritually. After that, the animal was killed according to carefully laid-down regulations. In the context of sin-offerings, this action itself reflected the seriousness of sin. The priest would then take the blood of the sacrifice (which now symbolically represented the worshipper's life given up to God) to the altar in an act of reconciliation, or atonement, indicating that the sin had been dealt with and God and the sinner had been reconciled to each other. At this point the animal's body may be placed on the altar in the temple, signifying that the worshippers were offering their whole being to God. Finally, much of the meat would be eaten in a meal shared with others, thereby showing that sacrifice not only reconciled people to God, but also to one another. This, in general terms, is what the New Testament writers had in mind when they described Jesus' death as a 'sacrifice'. Hebrews in particular goes further, however, and argues that there was some intrinsic connection between the inherited Jewish understanding of sacrifice and the death of Jesus, with Jesus' death being the actual fulfilment and consummation of the traditional rites. His death was the reality, the sacrifices the picture. Other writers applied the imagery in a looser way, comparing the beneficial effects of the cross (reconciliation to God) with the outcome of animal sacrifices, but without necessarily drawing detailed parallels between them.

Ransom

One of the few statements about the cross and its meaning in the gospels is found in Mark 10:45, where Jesus himself is reported as saying that his intention was to be a ransom. This figure of speech is much easier to understand, for the idea of kidnappers demanding the payment of a ransom in exchange for the safe release of their captives is well understood. The background to this picture in the New Testament was not, of course, the hijacking of planes or the kidnapping of diplomats, though the general concept was the same. The ransom in this case would be the price paid to set a slave free. In the Roman world, this ransom was often paid by a third party, who would accompany the slave in an act of worship at the shrine of their local deity. There the ransom was paid to the slave's owner in a religious ceremony. The legal theory was that the slave had been bought by the gods, and so could no longer be owned by another human.

When the emphasis is on the resulting freedom, this is a very appropriate way of describing Jesus' death. The New Testament frequently affirms that a person set free by Jesus is redeemed in order to belong to God. So 1 Peter could speak of Christians as 'ransomed from… futile ways' (1:18, NRSV), and Paul reminded his readers that 'you are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body' (1 Corinthians 6:19–20, RSV), even linking this image to sacrificial language by exhorting those who were set free 'to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God' (Romans 12:1, NRSV). However, like all the other images used to illustrate the meaning of Jesus' death, this one is open to misunderstanding, even reduction to absurdity, when it is understood in a literalistic way, for example by asking to whom Jesus paid the ransom. But regarded in the way that the New Testament presents it, it is perhaps the most comprehensive of all the pictures used there to describe what Jesus did on the cross: he set free those who were oppressed.

For others

To say that Jesus died as a sacrifice, or to pay a ransom, is basically to say that he died in the place of other people. On the cross he did something that the human race could not do for itself. This representative nature of Jesus' death is expressed in 1 Peter 2:24, by the statement that Jesus 'bore our sins in his body… by his wounds you have been healed' (NRSV). This is a powerful image, but once again it is important to clarify what is meant by saying that Jesus suffered in the place of others, if this picture too is not to end in absurdity – or worse, that it actually contradicts the picture of God portrayed in an unambiguous way in Jesus' teaching.

It is not difficult to imagine a legal scene like a law court, in which God is the judge, a harsh, authoritarian figure demanding that justice not only be done, but be seen to be done. Instead of the human race as a whole being on trial for the way the values and standards of God's kingdom have been disregarded, Jesus finds himself there. Even though he is guilty of nothing, and certainly not worthy of the death penalty, he is to become the unfortunate victim of God's harsh and unbending demand for justice. Understood in that way, this opinion raises some significant questions. Far from exemplifying perfect principles of justice, it seems to imply that God is actually less just than a human judge, for how many of us would consider justice to be satisfied if an innocent person was punished in place of a guilty one? It suggests that God has a perverted sense of justice and moral responsibility – for how many of us would agree that it is always good for us to escape having to face up to the consequences of our own wrongdoing? These questions, and others like them, only make sense if we read the New Testament through the legalistic rational agenda of the Enlightenment, in which everything has to have a direct cause and effect that can be quantified, analyzed, and turned into a theory. Signs of that can be found in some aspects of classical Greek philosophy which significantly influenced theological reflection in the early Christian centuries, especially in relation to the formulation of the creeds, though none of them offer anything more than a straightforward statement of the fact of the crucifixion. The earliest example of such questioning is in the works of Anselm (1033–1109), who speculated about who might have been 'satisfied'

by the death of Jesus, though he also recognized the original significance of sacrifice as a way of reaffirming community in a shame-based culture, and in a convoluted discourse claimed that the heart of the metaphor concerned shame as it impinged on the being God.

This is not the place to engage more comprehensively with these arguments, except to note that the picture of God being assumed there is a caricature of the image of God presented by Jesus in New Testament. For the Greek philosophers ‘God’ was a terrible and awesome figure, remote from the everyday concerns of ordinary people, and generally more interested in punishment than in forgiveness. The idea that God is like that has been perpetuated by more recent generations even of Christians. The use of exclusively male language to refer to God has often created the impression that God behaves like the worst sort of macho warrior, and what is in effect a secularization of the biblical image has in turn made it all too easy for the values of Jesus’ teaching to be corrupted and replaced by an essentially alien worldview. If there is anything distinctive about the teaching of Jesus, it has to be in the way he redefined God, replacing the harsh confrontational image of judgment and condemnation with the language of family love and acceptance. It may place question marks against some deeply held inherited beliefs, even among Christians, but there is no escaping the fact that the image of God offered by Jesus is not about domination, power, control, and exploitation, but has at its heart vulnerability, weakness, and affirmation of the human condition. This is the point at which incarnation and cross come together, for when the New Testament speaks of Jesus suffering on behalf of others, those others have already been redefined as members of Jesus’ own family. His suffering on their behalf was not something imposed by a stern judge to fulfil the demands of some abstract notion of justice, it was rather suffering in the way that a person might suffer for a member of their own family. In that context, the reality of evil is certainly not diminished: it might actually be taken more seriously than any merely legal process can. But when it is addressed in the context of a family, it is always going to be with a view to unconditional acceptance even of those who have done wrong, and a progression towards forgiveness and new life in the context of a supportive group – which is exactly how sacrifice was understood in those cultures where it was a natural metaphor to use in relation to a death that had the power to ensure community renewal and coherence.

Grace and forgiveness

Each of these ways of talking about Jesus' death has its inadequacies, for they are all only pictures, and even to the writers of the New Testament the cross remained a great mystery. But two aspects of God's relationship with the human race run through all these images.

One of the most pressing challenges in life is the problem of evil. If God is really loving and forgiving, why is there so much evil in the world? If God is a forgiving God, then surely the universe should be arranged differently so that the stupidity of people will not cause so much suffering? There is no easy answer to such questions but in biblical terms they are part of the frustration of a world that has been so spoiled in such a way that Paul could speak of 'the whole creation… groaning in labour' as it waits to be released from its suffering so that new life may come to birth (Romans 8:18–25, NRSV). The cross shows that, even if the suffering that is so endemic in human experience is not removed, God shares it with us. If Jesus was, as the earliest Christians believed, divine, then in the cross God personally was somehow sharing the final and extreme consequence of human wickedness.

The cross highlights the cost of forgiveness and, therefore, of discipleship. Forgiveness is often costly, especially when it involves relationships within a family. It is often more demanding to forgive a close friend than someone who is otherwise a stranger. Grace does not come cheap. Forgiveness is not an arbitrary thing, and its cost is seen in the crucifixion.

Ultimately all these statements are figures of speech, pictures, metaphors, analogies. Some of them seem remote, even irrelevant to the images we would most easily adopt today. It is natural to ask ourselves why the first Christians found it necessary to reflect on Jesus' death in such complicated terms. Could

they not have contented themselves with regarding him as a good man dying a bad death? Was it really necessary to turn a sad story into a theological explanation of the meaning of life? The answer to questions like that is to be found in what they believed to have happened three days after the cross. For they were convinced that Jesus came to life again. If they had not believed that, then no one would ever have imagined that the cross had any further significance beyond itself. But because of their belief in the resurrection, which was inextricably bound up with their experience of the Spirit of Jesus at work in their own lives, the earliest Christians were totally convinced that he really was who he had seemed to be, and that meant his life must have consequences that went well beyond the few years of Jesus' own ministry on the fringes of the Roman empire. Knowing what to make of all that is perhaps the most crucial question of all, and one to which we turn our attention in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

RESURRECTION

The universal belief of the earliest followers of Jesus, and of Christians ever since, is that Jesus' crucifixion, far from being the end of the story, was only its beginning. There would have been no church, and the New Testament would never have been written, were it not for his disciples' unshakeable certainty that Jesus was raised to life on the third day after his death. The idea that dead people can come back to life again is not a normal part of life experience, so unsurprisingly the claims about Jesus' resurrection have been met with many different responses through the ages. Those whose outlook is dominated by a rationalist-materialist worldview, believing that the only things that are real are what we can see and touch and handle, have dismissed it as an impossible fantasy, the sort of story that only naïve and gullible individuals would either invent or take seriously. Others, regarding the universe as an open system in which, in theory at least, almost anything might happen to challenge what we regard as normal, have no problem in correlating it with their own stories of out-of-body experiences, astral projection, even visits by aliens from other worlds. Believers and unbelievers alike are tempted to fall back on their presuppositions in relation to the resurrection stories, but doing that is not the way to understand the mindset of the first Christians. None of them expected anything remotely like resurrection, and they were as surprised as anyone at what they believed to have happened. Whatever else might be said of them, they were not people who would believe absolutely anything, however bizarre it might seem. On the contrary, when the evidence is examined more dispassionately, it turns out that they offer a far more sophisticated understanding of resurrection than either their critics or their supporters tend to imagine. Of course, none of us can escape the limitations of our own presuppositions, and it does no harm for us to recognize them and to make conscious allowance for the likelihood that our preconceived notions will affect the way we read a story such as this, and also the sort of questions we might wish to address to the text. Objectivity, in so far as it is attainable, will always start with a recognition of our own predilections and personal inclinations.

There can be no question that the earliest Christians were completely convinced that the resurrection event (or, more accurately, complex of events) was a real, tangible occurrence that had taken place in their own world, and which exercised a profound influence on their own lives. Whereas it is unclear just how widespread was belief in the conception of Jesus by a virgin, the resurrection was a different matter altogether. Paul spoke for the whole of the early church when he declared that if the reality of Jesus' resurrection was denied the Christian faith would be emptied of its meaning (1 Corinthians 15:17). By way of unpacking that conviction, Paul proceeded in the same passage to give a list of people who could verify that Jesus had come to life again, so he obviously thought of the resurrection event as something that could be attested by witnesses – an outward, empirical happening that could be shared by other people, rather than an internalized private experience. At the same time, the other dominant – and perhaps surprising – feature of the New Testament accounts is that there is no account of an actual act of rising again, but only stories telling of the consequences of that as demonstrated through the empty tomb and the subsequent appearances of the risen Jesus.

Evidence from the New Testament

There is an enormous amount of literature on the topic of Jesus' resurrection, and anything that can be said here is bound to be brief and is unlikely to cover all the possible nuances that are emphasized in the New Testament, let alone in wider theological reflection on the subject. Four particular elements emerge as significant in relation to the New Testament accounts.

The early church

The earliest evidence for the resurrection almost certainly dates from the period immediately after it is said to have taken place and is found in the summaries of Christian faith reported in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Of course, these are now contained in a document that was compiled in its present form no less than thirty years after the death of Jesus, and perhaps as much as fifty years later, though there is a widespread consensus that the first few chapters of Acts preserve material from very early sources. The language used in speaking about Jesus in these early speeches in Acts is quite different from that which was in common use at the time when the book was compiled in its final form. It is also quite different even from the letters of Paul, which were certainly written long before the book of Acts. So we may be reasonably certain that here we have early sources that have not been revised in the light of later expressions of faith. Indeed, these early speeches show a type of belief about Jesus that looks more like a development within Judaism than (as later emerged) a separate faith altogether. According to this picture, the central feature of the message of the early Christian church was the story of Jesus himself – how he had come to fulfil the promises of a Messiah, how he had died on the cross, and how he had come back to life again. The message of these first Christians was so consistently expressed that it has been possible to discern a regular pattern of statements that were apparently made about Jesus from the very earliest times. C. H. Dodd, who first identified this pattern of statements, called it the kerygma, a Greek word meaning ‘the declaration’. Every authentic account of the Christian message contained these statements:

Jesus has fulfilled the promises of the Hebrew scriptures

God was at work in his life, death, and resurrection

Jesus has now been exalted to heaven

the Holy Spirit has been given to the church

Jesus will soon return in glory

all who hear the message must respond to its challenge, showing a willingness to change their lifestyle and follow Jesus.

If the resurrection was to be removed from this kerygma, then most of what follows would make little sense. The whole existence of the early church was based on the belief that Jesus was no longer dead, but was alive and active through the work of the Spirit in the lives of his followers. It also seems likely, from the evidence in Paul's letters as well as from Acts, that an important qualification for an apostolic leader was that he or she had seen the risen Jesus. This was explicitly made a condition when the apostles came to appoint a formal successor to Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:21–22), and Paul also claimed that his famous Damascus road experience gave him the same status as those who had been apostles before him because it was an encounter with the risen Jesus (Galatians 1:11–17).

Paul

The second main piece of evidence regarding the resurrection is provided by Paul himself in 1 Corinthians 15. If there is room for differing opinions on the importance of the evidence of Acts, there is no such room in the case of Paul's evidence. He was certainly writing his letter no more than twenty-five years after Jesus was crucified and his statements may well form the earliest piece of documentary evidence for the belief that Jesus had risen again. It is obvious both from the contents of 1 Corinthians and from its context that Paul's main intention there was not to give a reasoned argument for believing in the resurrection of Jesus. He was, rather, trying to help his readers to address a specific set of questions that had arisen in their local faith community. The information he included about how Jesus rose from the dead is more or less incidental, which in itself makes it all the more impressive, for he reminded the Corinthians that what he was saying was something they had known and believed from the beginning. Even though he sketched the details in just a few sentences, his account shows that at a very early date Christians, even in Greece, were quite familiar with the story of crucifixion and resurrection. In this account Paul refers to an occasion when the risen Jesus was seen by more than 500 disciples at one time, most of whom he says were still alive when he wrote and could confirm what he said (1 Corinthians 15:6). He also mentions an appearance to James, the brother of Jesus, and includes his own conversion encounter with the risen Lord among these resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:7–8). Though they were all written later than Paul's letters to Corinth, the gospels never mention these appearances of the risen Jesus at all, which suggests that the fact of Jesus' resurrection was so widely believed among the first generations of Christians that the people who wrote the gospel stories did not even think it important to marshal all the evidence for it. As with the rest of their narratives, they used only a small selection of the material that was at their disposal.

The Gospels

The stories found towards the end of each of the four gospels are of course the main source of information about Jesus' resurrection, though they present their own challenges as the various accounts are not easy to reconcile with one another, and producing an 'agreed version' of how the New Testament says it all happened is easier said than done. At first sight, this can look like an argument against the resurrection having happened at all, but it can also be claimed as a strong argument on the other side. If there had been some conspiracy the overwhelming likelihood is that there would have been a deliberate effort to ensure that there was only one authorized version of events. Only those who are completely convinced of the overall truth of their narrative would allow different accounts to stand alongside one another – knowing that eye witnesses regularly describe what they have seen with different nuances, especially when this concerns incidents that cannot easily be reconciled with their expectations of how things ought to be. The story of someone rising from the dead would be much more difficult to believe if all four gospels had given exactly the same account. In fact, though there are minor differences in detail, all the accounts agree on the main parts of the story: that the tomb was empty, and Jesus appeared to the disciples.

In Mark, the first gospel to be written, the account ends at 16:8, and what follows in some English versions as 16:9–20 is generally considered to be a later addition. In this account, some women who came to the grave on the Sunday morning to finish the process of embalming Jesus' body found that the stone slab used as a door to the rock tomb had been rolled back, and were terrified by the sight of a young man in white sitting inside. This 'young man' (who is clearly intended to be understood as an angel) assured them that Jesus had risen and told them to tell the disciples that he would meet them in Galilee (Mark 16:6–7). Not surprisingly, the women ran away terrified from the graveyard, and because of their fear they told no one of what they had seen and heard. Luke includes the story of a couple returning to their home in the village of Emmaus who met the risen Jesus without recognizing him. They spoke of women visiting the grave and seeing a vision of angels who assured them that Jesus was alive (Luke

24:22–24), though there is no mention of them delivering the message about Galilee. Maybe the women omitted that for the reason given by Mark: they were afraid to go back there, for they thought that the ruler of that area, Herod Antipas, would now be ready to get rid of any of Jesus' followers who were found there.

Matthew repeats Mark's account though with some additional details, mostly directed towards heightening the dramatic elements of the story. He speaks of a great earthquake on the Sunday morning, and also mentions the terror of the guards at the tomb (Matthew 28:1–4). In this account, the women are still central but left the grave in a mixed mood of fear and joy and were met by Jesus himself, who repeated the message about going to Galilee (Matthew 28:5–10). Matthew includes a story showing how the disciples followed this instruction at once, and describes how they met with the risen Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, where they were commissioned to take his message to all nations and invite others to join them in a life of discipleship (Matthew 28:16–20). This appearance of Jesus seems not to be the same as the later ascension story told by Luke: Jesus made similar statements on each occasion, though the ascension took place not in Galilee but in or near Jerusalem (Luke 24:44–53; Acts 1:6–11). In effect, Matthew brings the story begun by Mark to its logical conclusion: Jesus' appearance in Galilee and commission to the disciples to proclaim the good news about him.

Luke's account also differs from Mark's: there were two angels in the tomb, and Galilee is mentioned not as the location where Jesus would meet the disciples later, but as the place where he had originally foretold his death and resurrection (Luke 24:1–11). When the women told the disciples their story, it was not believed. Some manuscripts of Luke insert a story of Peter and John visiting the tomb to confirm what the women reported, but that is probably a later effort to harmonize Luke's story with the incident recorded in John 20:1–10. After the account of the couple on the road to Emmaus, and then all the disciples in a room in Jerusalem (Luke 24:13–43), Luke goes on to record the ascension on the road to Bethany as if it followed immediately after the resurrection (Luke 24:44–53) – though in Acts (also written by Luke) the ascension took place after an interval of forty days (Acts 1:3). Luke does not mention an appearance in

Galilee. John's Gospel, on the other hand, describes appearances of Jesus in both Jerusalem and Galilee. Of the women named in the other gospels as having discovered the empty grave, only Mary Magdalene is mentioned here, though the fact that she uses the plural pronoun 'we' in reporting it to Peter implies that others were with her (John 20:1–2). They found the tomb empty and returned to tell the disciples, whereupon Peter and John went to the tomb and found the grave clothes lying undisturbed – proof that the tomb had not been robbed (John 20:3–10). At this point Mary saw two angels and was greeted by Jesus, whom she mistook for the gardener (John 20:11–18). An account then follows of two appearances to the disciples in Jerusalem. During the first of these Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit (John 20:19–29), while the last chapter of John describes Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee and how he had breakfast with them before re-commissioning Peter (21:1–22).

Despite these detailed differences in the accounts, there are certain distinctive features about these stories.

They all emphasize two main facts: that Jesus' tomb was unexpectedly found to be empty, and that the risen Jesus was seen by different people on several different occasions. Both these pieces of evidence were important. By itself, the fact of the empty grave would prove nothing except that Jesus' body was not there. Without the empty grave, the visions would prove nothing objective, though they might reveal something about the mental state of the disciples. But the combination of the two facts, if they are indeed correct, would be strong evidence in support of the claim that Jesus was alive.

When the resurrection narratives are compared with many of the other stories about Jesus, they are told in a relatively simple and uncomplicated way. For example, they contain no symbolism requiring special insight to understand, nor are there many subtle allusions to the Hebrew Bible, or any real attempt to bring out the theological significance of the events they describe. If they are compared

in this respect with, say, the accounts of how Jesus was baptized, the contrast is very marked indeed.

The disciples

The fourth, and final piece of evidence relating to the resurrection event is the indisputable fact that a thoroughly disheartened band of disciples, who should by all the rules of historical probability have been depressed and disillusioned by their leader's crucifixion, were in the space of seven weeks transformed into a strong band of courageous witnesses, and the nucleus of a constantly growing faith community. The central fact of their witness was that Jesus was alive and active, and they had no hesitation in attributing the change in themselves to what had happened as a result of his rising from the dead. They themselves were obviously convinced of the reality of his continuing existence, for the resurrection was not just something they talked about: it was something they were willing to die for. No one dies willingly for something unless they are totally convinced of its truth.

Facts and faith

So much, then, for the various pieces of information supplied by the New Testament. What can be made of it? Three general observations are worth making:

There is no evidence that the risen Jesus appeared to anyone apart from his own followers, though the possibility is not entirely excluded from the various narratives. There is some debate about the intended readership of the gospels, but it is a reasonable assumption that there would be most interest among people who either were already Christians or were sufficiently interested in the faith to want to know more about it. In this context, the first concern of the gospels was to describe what it might be like when would-be disciples encounter the living Jesus. Luke's story of the couple on the road to Emmaus is typical of such people: a couple who at some level had been followers of Jesus during his lifetime, but were disillusioned by his unexpected crucifixion and were left wondering what it had all been about (Luke 24:13–35).

Evidence about somebody who appeared and disappeared in a room with closed doors is obviously quite a different kind of evidence than historians normally deal with. That is not to say it should be inadmissible, but it certainly does not fit into the ordinary rules of evidence.

The fact that Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18), the couple on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), and the disciples in the boat on Lake Galilee (John 21:4–8) all failed to recognize Jesus initially, even though they knew him well and had seen him only a few days before, suggests that his physical appearance must have changed in a way that would certainly be confusing to any ordinary witness in giving evidence.

There can be no question that the earliest church believed that Jesus had come back to life again. The disciples and their followers knew that something had happened to change their lives after the crucifixion of their master, and they explained this change by the fact that he had risen from the dead. But to speak of this kind of ‘resurrection faith’ is one thing; to speak plausibly of a ‘resurrection fact’ is quite another, though the two are inextricably connected. Obviously there must have been something that can be called ‘the resurrection fact’ which called forth the disciples’ ‘resurrection faith’. But what was it? It does not have to begin with the actual rising of Jesus’ physical body from death, and it is not difficult to think of alternative explanations.

A subjective experience?

It is natural to wonder if the so-called ‘resurrection appearances’ were purely subjective – experiences that believers might regard as visions while others may be more inclined to call them hallucinations. If we could assume that this is what happened, it would solve the problem, though it is not quite so simple.

The fact that the tomb was empty, and that neither friend nor enemy produced the body of Jesus is so strongly emphasized in the gospels that it must be accounted for. Both the Romans and Jesus’ religious opponents had an obvious vested interest in producing a body, for that would have squashed the Christian movement once and for all. It is therefore safe to assume that neither of these groups had removed it or knew where it was. The disciples, on the other hand, were prepared to stake their lives on the fact that Jesus was alive. Many of them were brutally murdered for their faith, including Peter and other members of Jesus’ inner circle, who would normally be prime suspects for having removed the body. It is highly improbable, if not impossible, to imagine that they would willingly have suffered in this way if all the time they knew where they themselves had hidden his corpse.

Although an individual experience like that of Peter or James might reasonably be regarded as subjective, and an appearance to a crowd of 500 might sound like a mass hallucination, an encounter such as that on the road to Emmaus, with the absence of excitement and the gradual recognition of the stranger by two people, has all the marks of an authentic account. The statements that the risen body could be touched, that the risen Jesus ate food with his disciples, and that he breathed on them, show that the disciples were convinced that they were in contact with something that was not a vision but was some sort of tangible entity.

Unlike the other disciples, Paul was what might be called psychically

experienced. He writes of having had mystical experiences on several occasions (1 Corinthians 14:18; 2 Corinthians 12:1–4), but he regarded his Damascus road experience as being in a different category altogether, to be compared only with the appearances of the risen Jesus to the other disciples. All the accounts describe such encounters in distinctive ways, being neither purely subjective like dreams, nor purely objective, but with some of the characteristics of both.

A theological construct?

It has been argued that the ‘resurrection faith’ arose because the disciples held some theological opinion that required it. Maybe their belief that Jesus was the Messiah also entailed the conclusion that he must rise from the dead in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of this claim. This explanation however raises more questions than it answers:

There is no evidence from any source at all to suggest that the Messiah was to die, let alone rise from the dead. On the contrary, the Messiah was popularly expected to kill other people, and if he suffered and died himself, then by definition he was not going to be the real Messiah. The very idea of a dying Messiah – even one who subsequently resurrected – would have been a seriously heretical opinion.

The notion of resurrection hardly features at all in the Hebrew Bible, and the more common view there is that individuals live on through their children rather than having their own after-life. The evidence suggests that this view was widely held at the time of Jesus, and most Jews would have had no concept of resurrection. There was no consistent expectation of life after death in the Hebrew tradition, let alone any preconceived notion of what it might be like. This included the disciples themselves, who at an earlier point in the story had no comprehension of talk of resurrection (Mark 9:9–10). It was not something on which they had either an opinion or an expectation: it was just not on their radar as a possibility at all. Given that the gospels were written long after, when the disciples knew very well what resurrection was, there is every reason to believe that the account of their previous ignorance is authentic.

It is also difficult to see how the idea of resurrection can have developed out of an interpretation even of such Old Testament expectations as there might have

been, since the resurrection stories are completely lacking in scriptural quotations. In this respect there is a sharp contrast with the stories of the crucifixion, which are full of such allusions.

A later belief?

It has also been argued that belief in Jesus' resurrection was a late idea, only coming to prominence after the Christians had been forced to leave Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish revolt against the Romans (AD 66–70). The suggestion is that until then, they regularly met for worship at the tomb of Jesus, and it was only after they had been barred from entering the city that they invented the story of the empty tomb in order to explain why, after all, they did not need to worship there. Paying homage at shrines dedicated to deceased heroes or loved ones has always been a common practice in many cultures and the popularity of roadside shrines even today bears testimony to its ongoing popularity. It happened in Jesus' day (see Matthew 23:29), and Christian pilgrims in the twenty-first century continue to visit Jesus' alleged burial site in the Church of the Resurrection and its rival, the so-called 'Garden Tomb'. But to suggest that the discontinuation of such a practice in the first century led to belief that Jesus was alive is completely far-fetched. For one thing, there is no evidence that anybody at all was interested in the place where Jesus was buried earlier than the fourth century. In addition, there are the statements made by Paul in 1 Corinthians, written at least ten years before AD 66. By that time, one gospel had certainly been written, and furthermore, the gospel accounts were undoubtedly based on stories that went right back into the earliest days of the church. It makes no sense at all to suppose that belief in the resurrection was a late development. The fact is that Christians did not venerate the tomb of Jesus because they believed there was nothing in it – and they held this belief right from the start.

Many other more fanciful suggestions have been made from time to time to account for the 'resurrection fact'. But the overwhelming weight of all the evidence suggests that, however it might be described in cognitive abstractions, the 'resurrection fact' was a real, historically-located event. No other hypothesis gives an adequate account of so much of the evidence.

The meaning of it all

To talk of describing the ‘resurrection fact’ in abstract terms, not to mention the language of scientific enquiry, moves well beyond the categories of thought of the first disciples. One of the most striking things about the evidence of the New Testament is that the disciples appear to have had no interest at all in probing the whys and wherefores of the ‘resurrection fact’. They knew that it was real because of their own experience of Jesus and the evidence of the empty tomb, and that was all they needed to know. This no doubt helps to explain why there is no attempt anywhere in the New Testament to offer a description of the resurrection itself. All the accounts document its consequences and impact in the lives of Jesus’ followers, but none of them attempt to go behind that to describe what actually took place. Some Christians in the second century regarded this as a deficiency and produced their own vivid descriptions of what the body of Jesus looked like, how it came out of the grave, and how those who saw it were affected by the experience. But the first witnesses seem to have had no interest in such details. For them, the resurrection was not just a happy ending to the story of Jesus: it was the natural climax of the whole of his life, and the vindication of the high claims made for him during his ministry. It was also a guarantee that the life and teaching of Jesus was not just an interesting chapter in the history of human thought, but was truly a declaration that the new way of life of which Jesus had spoken was now accessible to his followers. This is why the crucifixion and resurrection can never be separated from the continuing presence of the Spirit of Jesus (the Holy Spirit) in the lives of disciples, for that was the way in which they could be empowered to put into practice the new way of being that was the kingdom of God.

Paul went even further than that with his claim that without the resurrection the Christian message would be entirely meaningless. Subsequent generations of Christians have seen at least three consequences flowing from belief in the resurrection.

Identifying Jesus

The resurrection provides the undergirding for belief in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Peter said on the Day of Pentecost that the resurrection was a clear proof that ‘God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah’ (Acts 2:36, NIV). Paul wrote to the Christians of Rome that Jesus was ‘declared Son of God by a mighty act in that he rose from the dead’ (Romans 1:4, author’s translation). In spite of Jesus’ authority displayed in his teaching and actions, and the implied claims about his central role in the divine plan, without the resurrection he might have been thought of simply as a great and good man. As we saw in chapter 4, his claims to Messiahship were somewhat ambiguous, to say the least, and certainly open to more than one interpretation. But after the resurrection, his followers viewed his teaching in a new light, and came to appreciate his whole life in a different way, as the life of God personally lived out among ordinary mortals.

New life

The resurrection was more than just a new angle on the crucified Jesus. It is emphasized throughout the New Testament, and especially by Paul, that the resurrection, as well as the cross, was an indispensable part of the arrival of God's kingdom and all that entailed. The first Christians were practical people rather than theorists. What they wanted was something that would work in real life. They were longing for some kind of personal empowerment that would enable them to be the best people they could possibly be. They understood this in terms of living at peace with God, and being delivered from their self-centredness to live in harmony with other people and, indeed, with the natural environment. They realized that this was unlikely to be achieved either by formal religious observance or by their own efforts at self-improvement, and what was needed was some fresh energizing life-force that could transform the human personality. Paul found this new life-force in Jesus, and expressed it in a mystical way as a union between the deepest recesses of his own person and the Jesus who had been crucified and raised from death. It was such a striking reality for him that he could even write, 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). This was not just conventionally religious language, for Paul really seems to have meant what he said in the most literal sense: Jesus was now living in him in such a way that even the details of his life were determined not by him but by this indwelling Christ. In trying to express all this, Paul used imagery in which he compared the baptism of Christians with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:1–11). In baptism, Christians were covered with water as a physical symbol of something that would also happen inwardly and spiritually, so that being drenched with water was like being buried (as Jesus was), and coming out of the water was like being raised again (as Jesus was). The essence of Paul's understanding of these events was that becoming a Christian involved a willingness to 'die', in the sense of giving up a self-centred existence, so as to be 'raised' again to live according to different standards and values that could aptly be described as the life of Jesus himself living within. So the resurrection of Jesus was crucial, for if Jesus had only died on the cross, he might well have been understood to have set an example, or offered a sacrifice, or paid the price of human freedom, but his suffering would have had no power to affect everyday living. Without the resurrection, the cross would have been powerless to have any lasting impact on the lives of ordinary people. Because of

the resurrection, however, Paul had discovered a new life: he could even say without further qualification that ‘life is Christ’ (Philippians 1:21, RSV). Moreover, he was confident that this was to be the normal experience of everyone who was a Christian: Jesus Christ actually living in those who commit themselves to his way.

Future hope

The resurrection of Jesus has a further implication for those who already have Christ's life within them. An important part of Jesus' teaching in John's Gospel was that his followers would share in 'eternal life' (John 3:15; 4:14; 17:3). This 'eternal life' included two things. On the one hand, the phrase indicates that Christians were expecting to enjoy a new quality of life: 'eternal life' is 'God's life', and when Paul wrote of his own Christian experience as an experience of Christ living within him, he was reflecting a similar conviction. But to have the kind of life that God has does not just mean that Christians have a new dynamic for life here and now, for it also implies that the relationship with God inaugurated by faith in Christ will never end. This had been a distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching that was reinforced and emphasized by Paul when he wrote that the resurrected Jesus should be regarded as 'the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Corinthians 15:20, RSV). He understood this to mean that the rising again of Jesus was a pledge and a promise that his disciples, too, would survive death. Those people who shared in Christ's sufferings and resurrection in a spiritual sense had the assurance of a life beyond the grave which, like their present life, would be infused by the personal presence of God. But it would also be distinctive and new, for this resurrection life takes its character from the fact that Jesus is risen, and therefore shares the distinctive nature of that kind of renewed existence that Jesus now enjoys – a life in which suffering, death, and oppression are gone for ever and replaced by the new ways of God's kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:57).

The ascension

The story of the ascension is told only by Luke. In some ancient manuscripts the crucial words ‘and was taken up into heaven’ are missing from Luke 24:50–53, though Luke certainly describes it in some detail in Acts 1:6–11. This story marks the point at which the regular resurrection appearances of Jesus ceased and as such it is merely the culmination of several occasions when Jesus had disappeared from his disciples’ gaze in the forty days following the resurrection. From the time of the resurrection itself, Jesus was understood to have been exalted into the presence of God. When he left the couple at Emmaus, he did not return to some kind of earth-bound limbo, but to the heavenly glory into which, as the risen Son of Man, he had now entered. The actual story of the ascension presumably reflects some particular occasion when he left the disciples in a dramatic and memorable way, and after which they saw him no more. Though the ascension story itself is only recorded by Luke, the idea is referred to in several passages in John (20:17, 13:1, 16:10, 17:11), while Matthew concludes with the conviction that Jesus had received precisely the kind of universal authority that the ascension story seems to imply.

The notion that Jesus was taken ‘up into heaven’ can seem problematic as we no longer share the perception of ancient people that the universe was a three-tiered construction, with the earth sandwiched in the middle between the heavens and the underworld. In this frame of reference, it would be natural to think of Jesus being taken ‘up to heaven’. But even today, that could easily be a natural, common-sense way to describe such a disappearance. Acts 1:12 seems to place the ascension on the Mount of Olives, and Constantine subsequently built a church around a cave there that he believed marked the spot. Later tradition identified an open space as the more likely site of the ascension. In 384 AD, a Spanish Christian named Egeria joined in a celebration of the ascension on a small hill a little further up the Mount of Olives, and some six years later another woman called Poemenia had a shrine constructed there around a rock that bears a mark allegedly made by Jesus’ right foot as he said farewell to his disciples. The New Testament’s concern, however, is not with spatial definitions as such,

but with the fact that Jesus himself had now been exalted in glory. This was always implicit in the ‘Son of Man’ title, for in the book of Daniel this character received ‘authority, honour and royal power’ (Daniel 7:14). In the context of imagery depicting the cross as Jesus’ final struggle with the forces of evil, and his resurrection as the proof that he had triumphed, then the ascension demonstrated that this victory was absolute. It was a way of affirming the cosmic dimensions of Christian salvation, declaring that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was good news not only for people, but for the world of nature, and indeed for everything in the entire universe, for it brought order out of chaos and, in theological terms, represented the reversal of all that had gone wrong in the primeval fall, and both declared and inaugurated the possibility of renewal and rebirth.

PART 3

THE GOSPELS

CHAPTER 9

UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPELS

Our knowledge of Jesus is obviously based on those parts of the New Testament which tell of his life and work – the four gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In using them, several assumptions have been made about their character as literature, assumptions that have inevitably coloured the picture of Jesus presented here. For example, it has been assumed that, though they display some characteristics of biographical writing, they are not comprehensive chronicles of his entire life but rather are selective presentations of those aspects of his life and teaching which seemed most important to the people who first wrote them down. In addition, we have assumed that there is a good deal of overlap and repetition in their various accounts, so that one gospel may legitimately be used to elaborate or clarify the teaching contained in another. Then we have also taken it for granted that it is actually possible to know something about Jesus from the study of the gospels, that though they are indeed the products of the early church and therefore reflect the concerns and interests of their writers, this is no obstacle to discovering an authentic picture of Jesus as he actually was. In this chapter and the two which follow, some of these assumptions will be examined in greater detail, as we seek to understand the reasons for holding them, and to explore their implications.

What is a gospel?

Discussion of this question dominated scholarship throughout the twentieth century, and even now there is by no means a settled consensus regarding the best answer to it. The first step in understanding any piece of literature is to identify its style or genre, for that enables it to be placed alongside other similar writings and offers a prism through which to interpret its intention. In assessing the genre of any particular book, we need to take account (among other things) of the structure and style in which it is written, the stated intentions of the author (if any), the process whereby the writing has been put together, the way the author expected or intended it to be used, and the contents. Knowing what kind of writing we are dealing with – even in the most general terms – can make a difference to the way in which we read it.

An example taken from a more familiar world may help to illustrate this. Most people today get their information from digital media, whether that is television, social media, blogs, websites, or even radio, and we mostly differentiate the way a particular medium might report something more or less intuitively. The topic of poverty, for example, may be considered in a news bulletin, or in a documentary investigation, in a piece of drama, or through a personal story by a Facebook friend, and depending on the context most of us would intuitively know what to expect and how to interpret what we are hearing or seeing. The genre of news bulletin creates an expectation that this will be a broadly factual account of the subject, though we will also be likely to take account of the spin that the particular bulletin typically puts on things that it reports. If something is presented as a documentary we will probably expect it to be more wide-ranging, probing the subject from different perspectives, and constructing an argument that requires us to form some assessment for ourselves of what is being claimed. A piece of drama that tackles the subject of poverty might tell the contrasting stories of life for a typical family in the rich North and in the Global South. In the process of doing so it might easily combine features of the news bulletin and the documentary, but viewers would instinctively look at it with different expectations again, and a major purpose might easily be seen as entertainment even though it deals with some very serious issues. In the case of a story

reported on social media, our responses will vary enormously depending on whether we have any personal knowledge of what is reported, or whether the source of the story is generally trustworthy. Things are not always quite so clear-cut, of course. Fake news is part of the landscape of popular culture today, and even apparently trustworthy individuals cannot always be relied upon to tell the truth, while television and films often make subtle changes to the way they present a story in such a way that the genre of a particular piece is not always obvious. It can sometimes be hard to distinguish fact from fiction, for the two are either intentionally combined (as in drama-documentaries), or (as in science-fiction movies) the visual effects make even the most unbelievable possibilities seem factual, while speeches from politicians and others regularly present lies as if they were true facts. But the general point still stands: our perception of genre affects how we understand and respond to any information that comes our way.

That is also true of the Bible, and our understanding of the genre of the gospels will to a large extent determine how we process and understand what is in them. For most of the last hundred years and more, the gospels have been regarded as a totally unique form of literature created by the early church for the specific purpose of sharing their own faith in Jesus and to be used in the celebrations of Christian worship. It was taken for granted that, while our understanding of other types of literature found in the New Testament (most notably, the letters written by Paul and others) could be expanded by comparing them with writings of the same genre in the wider Hellenistic culture, that would be a waste of time in respect of the gospels for nobody else wrote anything like them. While that opinion is still current, a significant number of scholars are questioning it and are suggesting instead that, far from being unusual in their literary form, the gospels should be understood in the context of other literature of the time and in particular that they belong to a distinctive type of Greco-Roman writing that documented the lives of significant individuals.

Biography?

Using the word ‘biography’ to describe the gospels is something of an anachronism, since it was only in the fifth century that biography in the sense that we know it today first appeared. Ancient authors preferred to describe their works simply as ‘lives’. The Greek historian Plutarch (AD 46–120) wrote a whole series of them, including the Parallel Lives in which he placed the lives of important Greeks and Romans alongside each other in order to illustrate their respective strengths and weaknesses. But he was by no means alone, and Philo, Lucian, Xenophon, and Tacitus are only some of the better known authors who also wrote Lives.

A biography written today invariably offers a full chronological account of its subject’s life and accomplishments, starting with childhood years and progressing consecutively through adolescence and adulthood to show how the mature person has developed in response to the various influences of early life and environment. But this is not the way these Hellenistic writers constructed their Lives. For one thing, they were limited in length by the amount of material that could be fitted on a single scroll (typically not more than about 20,000 words). Within this frame of reference, they gave the briefest chronological account beginning with the subject’s birth, or emergence in public, and using selected stories and examples of their words and deeds before describing their death, which usually formed the climax of the story as it exemplified the integrity of their life and in the process revealed their true character. This is exactly the pattern found in all four gospels, where the main emphasis is on the events of the last week or so of Jesus’ life, prefaced by reports of Jesus’ teaching and accounts of a few incidents from the three years immediately preceding his death, with virtually no mention at all of his childhood and adolescence. As long ago as 1915, C. W. Votaw recognized the similarities between the gospels and the ancient Lives of Greco-Roman history writers. But mainstream scholarship moved in a different direction and embraced the emerging insights of form criticism, whose assumptions tended to undermine the possibility that the gospels might in any way be considered to be biographical. In particular, form critics preferred to think of the gospels not as the work of individual writers, but

as more or less amorphous collections of traditions about Jesus' teaching that were crafted in response to the concerns of the earliest Christian communities. Arising out of that was the further assumption that the gospels were therefore 'kerygmatic' documents, created for the purpose of communicating the primitive Christian message (kerygma) rather than to provide an account of the life of Jesus – or, at least, that if they happened to preserve reminiscences of his words and deeds then that was an unexpected bonus rather than their primary purpose.

Subsequent study – and in particular the emergence of redaction criticism (which is dealt with in more detail in the next chapter) – called these presuppositions into question by proposing that the gospel writers ('evangelists') were not just collecting traditions and recording them but were creative authors in their own right who reshaped their materials so as to address current concerns among their readers. The need to define what kind of literature they thought they were writing once again emerged as a key question and after several false starts, in which the gospels were occasionally compared to what turned out to be non-existent genres of literature in the Roman world, the Lives now look to be the category that most obviously fits. In addition to the general similarities mentioned above, other more specific comparisons can also be made.

In some instances, the gospels share particular stylistic characteristics of popular Greco-Roman Lives. Luke's preface, for example (Luke 1:1–4), follows a common literary practice of ancient writings, while both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies of their subject, and Luke also includes some time indications locating Jesus in the context of events in the wider Hellenistic world (2:1–2; 3:1–2).

The continuous nature of the gospel narratives, albeit generally encompassing only a short period of time, places them in the category of the classical Lives as distinct from the so-called apocryphal gospels of the second century, which contain disconnected sayings or stories, but without any overall framework.

Though the early Christians wanted to say much more about it, the way in which the gospels portray Jesus' death as a heroic martyrdom was another characteristic feature of traditional biographies of the time.

The gospels regularly use some literary devices that were popular with writers of Lives, for example the placing of key events or significant teaching within the context of meals, or the descriptions of private conversations and discussions between Jesus the teacher and his disciples.

Though there are exceptions, both gospels and ancient biographies generally displayed no interest in the personal psychological growth and development of the subject (something which readily distinguishes them from modern biography).

At the same time, some features of the gospels serve to set them apart from typical Greco-Roman Lives:

All four gospels were presented as anonymous pieces of writing, with only the fourth gospel offering the most cryptic of clues about its possible author (John 21:20–24). The names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were attached to them only later, probably to distinguish them from one another once they were all circulating together. This was highly unusual among traditional Greek or Latin authors and has given rise to speculation as to the reason for it. Were the gospel writers (conventionally known as 'evangelists') following an Old Testament pattern in which most books do not identify their authors? Or was it an intentional move so as to ensure the focus would always be on the message itself rather than on whoever wrote it down? Either way, it is a distinctive characteristic of these four accounts of the life of Jesus.

Luke is the only one who shares any significant stylistic characteristics with classical authors, though his gospel also raises other issues in relation to the fact that it seems to be the first part of a two-volume work, which included the Acts of the Apostles. While it is not impossible to regard Acts as a continuation in a biographical form, that is neither the most obvious nor the most plausible literary genre for it. It may be, though, that Luke (and, to a lesser extent, Matthew) represents a stage of gospel writing at which Christians were becoming more aware of the possibility of commending Jesus to educated Romans by conscious adoption of the literary conventions of the day.

All the gospels include extensive references to the Hebrew scriptures as a way of explaining their subject-matter. This would not generally recommend them to the literary élite of their day, and might actually have prevented their recognition in such circles, where examples from the Greek and Latin classics would have been considered more appropriate, and also more widely known. At the same time, it reminds us of the formative influence that the Jewish tradition undoubtedly had in the way Jesus' deeds and words were reported.

While traditional biographers would have portrayed their subjects as models of particular virtues that were admired by society at large, the gospel writers say very little about Jesus' personal characteristics, and when they do it is not to affirm some existing assumptions, but to present Jesus as the originator of a new set of values altogether.

The gospels appear to have been written not for general circulation in the literary marketplace, but for the benefit of Christian groups who would use them in the context of their own worship and mission. In that sense, form criticism has highlighted a significant aspect of their purpose.

An additional complicating factor in this attempt to place the gospels within a literary context in the Hellenistic world is the ongoing disagreement among experts in Greco-Roman literature about the extent to which authors would

follow the typical characteristics of a particular genre. There is some evidence to suggest that the divisions between different genres were not completely inflexible and that authors occasionally chose to combine different styles in any particular context – for example by incorporating into a Life narrative features that would strictly have been more at home in a novel, especially in elaborating the details of private conversations or in describing events that took place behind closed doors.

In the light of all these considerations, the best conclusion still seems to be that, while the gospels show a much greater acquaintance with the conventions of ancient literature than was once believed – especially with the category of popular biography – they have too many distinctive features for it to be plausibly concluded that their authors were self-consciously compiling works of literature that would take their place alongside the writings of classical authors. It is more likely that the evangelists had an awareness of the styles in which others were writing about their own heroes at the time, but were influenced by the conventions of the day only in the general sense that they were themselves part of Hellenistic culture and had a general familiarity with the way in which literature might be constructed so as to have as wide an acceptance as possible. Though their works undoubtedly display some of the characteristic features of the Lives, they are rooted within a distinctive set of purposes that more closely related to the needs of the evangelists and the Christian communities for which they wrote.

Good news?

In the end, we are still left with the necessity of turning to the Gospels themselves in order to ascertain their nature. What did their authors think they were doing as they wrote? The obvious place to begin is with Mark, which is commonly thought to be the earliest of the four, and therefore to a large extent provided a model for the others, especially Matthew and Luke, which in different ways may be regarded as revised versions of Mark. Mark 1:1 describes this work as 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ' (RSV), a statement that serves as a title or heading to what follows. Two words are relevant here in relation to understanding the purpose of the Gospel: 'beginning' and 'gospel'. 'Gospel' is simply the English equivalent of Mark's Greek word euangelion, and it was originally chosen because the two words had the same meaning: 'good news'. Mark, then, was writing about 'the beginning of the good news', which was not something detached or distant from Mark and his readers, but could actually be a way of referring to their own spirituality.

Mark and the other gospel writers had heard the 'good news' about Jesus, and their own lives had taken a radically new direction as a result of their acceptance of it and their decision to follow him. For them, an important part of discipleship was the need to make known to others the message that had changed their own lives. Their preaching and teaching did of course have a cognitive element within it, along the lines of those basic statements of faith identified by C. H. Dodd as the earliest kerygma. But for Mark and his contemporaries this message was far more than just a bare statement of propositional truths about Christian belief: it was also in an important sense the 'good news' of their faith, which had expressed itself in their own lives as they opened themselves to the possibility of new values and standards, and experienced the empowerment which came to them through the Spirit of Jesus as they sought to live in accordance with 'the kingdom', or as we suggested in chapter 4, 'God's ways of doing things'. When Mark described his book as 'the beginning of the good news', he was therefore saying that his purpose was to describe the first stage in the development of the message to which he and others had responded. The story he told was not a historical curiosity, but was an integral and important part of their own story and

experience as Christians. Luke had a similar intention, and in his preface informed his readers that his narrative was designed to enable them to know the full implications of the Christian message which they had heard so often (Luke 1:4). Indeed, Luke felt an even greater compulsion than Mark to emphasize the continuity of the life of the church with the life of Jesus by writing a second volume (the Acts of the Apostles) to bring the story more fully up to date.

When the writers of the gospels are called ‘evangelists’, therefore, this is an accurate definition of their intention. Jesus had challenged his hearers to change their ways and embrace a new style of being, and the gospels were intended to convey exactly the same challenge to those who read them in circumstances far removed from first-century Galilee. Like the Roman god Janus (who, appropriately, was the deity of doorways and new opportunities), the evangelists were looking in two directions at once: back to the life of Jesus himself, and outwards to their own cultural contexts and the Christian communities in which their own faith had been nurtured. This has at least four important consequences for our understanding of their narratives.

The gospels are clearly selective accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, mirroring the way these materials were used by his early followers. While incidents from Jesus’ life and teaching would be used as illustrations to explain more abstract theological points, the stories would also be told for their own sake, as self-contained presentations of the Christian message requiring no further explanation. Indeed Papias, a leader of the church at Hierapolis in the early second century, claimed that Mark’s Gospel consisted of summaries of the stories told by none other than Peter himself (Papias, quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.39.15).

The fact that the information contained in the gospels was first presented in this way goes some way towards explaining the apparent incompleteness of the gospel accounts. All four of them put together would hardly contain enough information to document three years of anyone’s life, let alone someone as active

as Jesus. But when we realize that the information they contain has been preserved because of its relevance to the life of the earliest churches, we can readily understand why so much that we would like to know has been left out. This probably explains why the New Testament has no mention of the early childhood of Jesus, nor for that matter any descriptions of what he looked like, or the kind of person he was. Had the evangelists been writing only to satisfy people's curiosity about Jesus, they may have included that sort of information. But that was not their intention. They were primarily concerned to nurture the faith of their Christian communities, and to invite other people to follow Jesus, and for these purposes such details were irrelevant.

If the gospels are illustrations of the apostolic preaching, this means that their contents cannot be regarded as simple stories about Jesus. They must to some extent reflect the beliefs of the evangelists. At one time it was fashionable to suppose that it was possible to recover from the gospels a picture of a simple Galilean teacher which had later been altered by Paul and others into a theological message about the Son of God. But it is now widely recognized that the gospels are themselves among the most important theological documents of the early church, and we can never in fact discover a picture of Jesus as a simple Galilean teacher. The Jesus found in the pages of the New Testament is always a person who is at the centre of great claims about his significance and who makes definitive pronouncements on the relationship of people to God. All his teaching and every incident recorded in the gospels has a specifically theological dimension to it.

If the authors selected their materials to serve their own purposes in writing, it follows that we can probably discover something about them and their readers by comparing their relative selection and use of information about Jesus. In the case of the first three gospels this can be done quite easily, for they tell more or less the same story in the same order, and each of them repeats large sections of the material that is found in the others, quite often using identical terminology. By comparing the different ways that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have used the deeds and teaching of Jesus in their narratives, it is possible to learn something about them and the situations in which they lived and worked.

Understanding the gospels fully is obviously a complex business. We need to know why the evangelists wrote as and when they did. Then we need to try to understand the way they assembled their material, and why they used it in one particular way rather than another. In addition, we must never lose sight of the way that the gospels were intended to serve not merely as information about Jesus, but as invitations to follow him.

Gathering materials

For the last 150 years or more, scholars have been obsessed with finding out how the evangelists got their information and what they did with it. Many answers have been given to those questions, not all of them compatible with each other. But the questions are still important: the way authors use their sources can provide helpful clues to the purpose of their writings, and to know what a writer is doing can be an essential part of grasping his or her message. Method and message are more closely connected than many readers appreciate. Since the gospels developed in the context of the mission and worship of the early church, we can expect to find clues to their origin by examining the church's message, which typically centred around three major themes: the promises of the Hebrew scriptures, information about Jesus and his significance, and a personal appeal to those who heard about these things to respond by choosing to follow Jesus for themselves.

The Hebrew scriptures

The first Christians were convinced that the ancient promises had come to fruition in the life of Jesus. The book of Acts offers summaries of this message in a somewhat generalized way, but in real-life situations it must have consisted of a more detailed explanation, whether in a predominantly Jewish or a mainly Gentile context. Anyone who was already familiar with the Old Testament would not have been content to know that, in some general way, Jesus was its fulfilment. They would have wanted a clear explanation of precisely which prophecies Jesus was supposed to have fulfilled, and on what evidence such a claim might be based. A favourite preoccupation of several groups within Judaism was the compilation of lists of Old Testament promises which the Messiah would fulfil when he came. Several such lists have been found at Qumrân, but they were not the only people who had such an interest. These lists are generally referred to as testimonia, referring to their function in providing scriptural testimonies to the coming of Christ.

The New Testament contains several indications of these text-lists in regular use among Christians from the earliest times. Matthew and John both refer to a considerable number of texts from the Old Testament, generally with a statement that they were fulfilled in some particular incident in the life of Jesus. The passages they quote are often relatively obscure, and it is striking that Matthew and John hardly ever used the same ones, perhaps because they were using different collections of testimonia. Some of Paul's letters also string Bible texts together in what can seem to be an arbitrary fashion, and here again the explanation may be that Paul originally found these grouped together under the same headings in a collection of Old Testament texts to which he had access. It could easily be that the collection of these scriptural texts was the very earliest form of literary activity in the Christian church. They would be assembled so that those who were engaged in sharing the Christian message could give specific examples to support their claim that Jesus had fulfilled the traditional expectations concerning the Messiah.

Words of Jesus

The central element in the kerygma was a series of statements about Jesus himself. No doubt in the very earliest days of the church's existence it would be possible to refer to him with no more than a passing reference to the details of Jesus' life and teachings, particularly in Palestine in the years immediately following his crucifixion for many could be assumed to know something about his life even if they had never met him. But before long Christian missionaries were spreading out far beyond Palestine and carrying their teaching to parts of the Roman empire where Jesus was quite unknown. In this different environment it would have been essential for the Christian message to include some information about Jesus himself, if only a skeletal outline of the most significant events such as death and resurrection.

Those who embraced the new faith would need further instruction, and that would presumably include the kind of teaching about Christian beliefs and behaviour that can be found in the various New Testament letters. An obvious and important source of such teaching must have been the remembered statements of Jesus himself – not necessarily identified as information about Jesus, but incorporated seamlessly into the developing tradition of the churches. For instance, in Romans 12–14 Paul gives advice that is so reminiscent of some of the most distinctive aspects of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that it is most natural to suppose that the two derive from the same source, even though Paul never actually says that he was quoting from or alluding to the teaching of Jesus. Other parts of Paul's writings also show that traditions related to Jesus' life and teaching were familiar to the early Gentile churches (1 Corinthians 7:10–11; 11:23–26; 15:3–11). It is therefore quite likely that long before the gospels were written in their present form the sayings of Jesus had already been collected to form the basis of teaching for new converts in the early church. No doubt there would be a number of such collections of Jesus' teaching (generally referred to as logia, a Greek word meaning 'sayings'), compiled for different purposes and occasions.

In addition to these general considerations, other indications also support the belief that this would be one of the earliest types of Christian writing about Jesus.

There certainly were later collections of this kind. A number of papyrus fragments dating from the third century AD, found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, contain sayings of Jesus, some of them different from those found in the New Testament, while the various Gnostic gospels also generally consist of sayings, as distinct from narratives. There are many unanswered questions about the authenticity of some of these documents, as well as the purpose for which they were compiled, but their existence demonstrates that the collection of sayings of Jesus was an ongoing activity in Christian circles.

The organization of the material in the gospels often seems to suggest that Jesus' sayings had been grouped together before they were placed in their present context. Many groups of sayings are only loosely linked together and do not form any kind of consecutive argument. For example, the sayings in Mark 9:49–50 have no obvious connection apart from the mention of salt: possibly they had already been gathered together on that basis alone before Mark incorporated them in his gospel. The same can probably be said for even quite extensive sections such as the Sermon on the Mount. There is no very obvious consecutive argument running through these chapters (Matthew 5–7), and virtually all interpreters are agreed that the shape of the sermon was constructed by Matthew, as the same sayings appear in quite different contexts in Luke's Gospel. Since these particular teachings all deal with matters of behaviour, Matthew probably brought them together to provide a summary of Jesus' ethical teaching that would be easily accessible to new converts.

A strong reason for assuming the existence of collections of Jesus' sayings early in the church's history is the fact that Matthew and Luke have a large amount of material that is common to both their gospels, but which is absent from Mark. It consists almost entirely of Jesus' teachings, but also includes the story of his

baptism and temptations (Matthew 3:13–4:11; Luke 3:21–22; 4:1–13) and one miracle, the healing of a centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10). The generally accepted explanation of this common material is that Matthew and Luke both used the same collection of Jesus' sayings and incorporated it into their respective gospels. This sayings collection is referred to as Q, a convenient abbreviation of the German word Quelle, meaning 'source'. Its exact form is still a matter of debate, but many scholars regard it as a written document and believe that Luke in particular followed it very closely in the way he incorporated its material into his own narrative – so closely, in fact, that some now refer to Q material by using the symbol Q followed by the chapter and verse reference from Luke. So, for example, the original Q story of the healing of the centurion's servant (as distinct from the edited versions of it contained in Matthew and Luke) might be referred to as Q 7:1–10. The existence of Q in some form, whether written or oral, is certainly credible, not least because its alleged contents follow a pattern known from the prophetic books of the Old Testament. These generally consist mostly of the prophet's spoken messages, but supplemented by an account of the prophet's call and typically one or two representative incidents from his life. Q seems to follow the same model, with an account of Jesus' baptism and temptation (which can reasonably be equated with his call), and an illustration of the most typical of his activities (a healing miracle), but with the main emphasis on his teaching.

From the evidence assembled so far, it may be concluded that from the very earliest times the church's main interest was in two kinds of literature: the testimonia, and the logia of Jesus. They may also have had a commonly agreed outline of the course of Jesus' life and teaching, though that is less certain. In any event, it was not long before it became necessary to gather all this material together in a more permanent form, perhaps in the first instance by the rewriting of logia in the light of the testimonia, supplemented by an outline narrative to give coherence and form to the enterprise. It is difficult to be sure for how long this process continued, but the end product was to be the four documents we now know as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Constructing the narratives

The first three gospels are referred to as the synoptics because they are so much alike: when they are set out in columns alongside one another, it is obvious that much of their material is a variation on a common theme shared by the others, though each of them is too distinctive for them to be regarded only as different editions of the same information. Many of the resemblances between these gospels could be explained by imagining that their authors had used the same collections of sayings, which had been circulating in slightly different forms among different groups of Christians, but a close examination of them shows that this would be too simplistic a solution. There are so many instances where the three synoptics use precisely the same words and grammatical constructions in the same contexts that the only reasonable conclusion is that they must have shared written sources. As early as the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo was proposing that Matthew was written first, Mark then made a summary of Matthew, and eventually Luke came along and wrote his gospel on the basis of the other two. Until the late nineteenth century this view was widely accepted, albeit with variations – as, for example, when J. J. Griesbach (1745–1812) argued that Luke followed Matthew, and Mark subsequently abbreviated both of them.

Virtually no one today would believe that either Matthew or Luke was the first gospel to be written, for several reasons.

It is hard to see why anyone would have shortened Matthew and Luke to create a gospel like Mark, that omits so much significant material, with no mention of Jesus' birth and childhood, very little on the resurrection, and comparatively little about some of his most distinctive teaching. Given the importance of those elements that are either omitted or underplayed in Mark, it is impossible to think that anyone would have been satisfied with Mark's account if they already had access to Matthew and Luke. Indeed, within a short time Christians preferred Matthew and Luke over Mark for this very reason. If Mark was written last, in

full knowledge of the other two, then it is difficult to explain why it was written at all.

Much of Mark's language seems to point to the same conclusion. If Mark used the polished accounts of Matthew and Luke, why did he so often write Greek that is virtually unintelligible? The parable of the mustard seed is a good example: Matthew and Luke are similar to each other, and both contain eloquent Greek expressed in a sophisticated style (Matthew 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19). Mark 4:30–32, by contrast, contains a very complicated Greek sentence which has no verb, and makes imperfect sense as it stands. If Mark was copying Matthew's or Luke's account, then it looks as if he went out of his way to avoid using their grammatically correct words, substituting a construction that is all but meaningless. If Mark was trying to produce good literature it is very difficult to think of a good reason for doing that. But what if he was intentionally presenting his story in a colloquial style that would lend itself to public reading or performance, using the sort of sentences that would be heard in everyday conversation rather than trying to emulate the literary masterpieces of Greek and Roman authors?

It is almost as difficult to believe that Luke read and used Matthew's Gospel. Matthew contains one of the greatest literary masterpieces in any of the gospels, the Sermon on the Mount. If Luke had that before him as he wrote, why did he break it all up, using some of its content in his own Sermon on the Plain, but scattering the rest of it in small sections throughout his own narrative?

For all these reasons scholars have preferred a rather different explanation of the relationships between the gospels, in which Matthew and Luke both used two existing source documents, namely what we now know as Mark's Gospel and the hypothetical document Q. We know for certain that Luke used a variety of sources because he explicitly says that he had sifted through the work of other people, selecting those parts of their accounts that were suitable for his own purpose in writing (Luke 1:1–4). In view of its close connections with Mark and Luke, it seems highly likely that the author of Matthew must have used a similar

method. Five major considerations indicate that Matthew and Luke used Mark.

Wording

A comparison of the words used in different texts is a very simple way of determining their literary connections. More than half of Mark's actual vocabulary is contained in Matthew and Luke, and both of them have identical sections not found in Mark – suggesting that there was one source known to them all, and another source used only by Matthew and Luke.

Order

If the order of events in a narrative contained in more than one gospel also corresponds with those sections that have the same wording, it is reasonable to go a step further and assume that a common source lies behind them, whose order as well as wording has been substantially reproduced by all three evangelists. Again, there is much evidence for this. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow the same general order of events, beginning with John the Baptist's ministry, then moving onto Jesus' teaching in Galilee, while noting the rising tide of opposition from the religious authorities. During this period, Jesus is shown making journeys to remote northern areas to give teaching privately to his disciples, before finally they all go to Jerusalem, and Jesus' last days, his trials, crucifixion, and resurrection. It is not just that the same narrative framework appears in all three synoptics, but within this framework particular incidents are also often recorded in the same order. This feature is easiest to explain if Matthew and Luke were using Mark rather than the other way round. It is striking that when Matthew departs from Mark's order, Luke has the same order as Mark; and when Luke departs from Mark's order, Matthew follows Mark (for specific examples, compare Mark 3:13–19 with Matthew 10:1–4 and Luke 6:12–16). There is only one incident which both of them place differently from Mark: the appointment of the twelve disciples. Sometimes Matthew or Luke will leave the pattern of Mark's narrative in order to add something new, but after their addition they usually return to the point in Mark at which they left off. This is one of the strongest arguments to support the conclusion that Matthew and Luke must have copied Mark, and not the other way round.

Contents

An analysis of the contents of the narratives also reveals the use of different sources. If one writer records the same story in the same words and order as another author, then it is reasonable to suppose either that both have used the same source, or that one has used the work of the other. This is what happened in the case of the synoptic gospels: of the 661 verses in Mark, 606 are found in Matthew in a virtually identical form, and about half of them are also contained in Luke.

Style

This is a more difficult criterion to use satisfactorily, as an author's style can depend on many variables – things like the situation in which he or she is writing, the intended readership, whether a secretary was used, and so on. There certainly are some notable stylistic differences between Mark and the other two synoptics, and on the whole Mark's Gospel is written in what from a literary standpoint is a poorer Greek than the others. For example, he very often describes incidents in the historic present tense (using the present tense to speak of something that happened in the past). Even in the same passages, however, Matthew and Luke always have a past tense, which is, of course, the correct literary form. This argument for dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark is not as strong as it is sometimes imagined to be, for it relies on the assumption that the evangelists would of necessity use their sources in a rather wooden way, simply copying out word for word what they had before them. In reality, not many authors would follow a source closely enough for its style to obscure their own, and if Mark's knowledge of Greek was limited, then his grammar would tend to be poor whether or not he was copying from some other source. But other considerations all point to Matthew and Luke having used Mark, not the other way round. For example, in eight cases where Mark records sayings of Jesus in Aramaic there is no trace of this in Luke, and only one example in Matthew. It would certainly be more likely that Matthew and Luke would have omitted the Aramaic sayings than that Mark would have deliberately introduced them.

Theology

If it could be shown that one gospel narrative contains a more sophisticated theological outlook than another, then it may seem reasonable to regard it as the later of the two. There are certainly some discernible differences of emphasis in the gospels. For example, Matthew and Luke appear to have modified or omitted certain statements in Mark that could be thought dishonouring to Jesus. The blunt statement of Mark 6:5, that in Nazareth Jesus ‘could do no mighty work’ appears in Matthew 13:58 as ‘he did not do many mighty works there’ (RSV), while Luke omits it altogether. Similarly, Jesus’ question in Mark 10:18, ‘Why do you call me good?’ (RSV) appears in Matthew 19:17 as, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good?’ (RSV). Surely, then, the more primitive a statement, the earlier it must be? This might sound like a reasonable conclusion, but it is not quite that simple. It is not always easy to determine whether an apparent difference is a real one, nor is it altogether self-evident on what basis a particular view should be described as ‘sophisticated’ over against another that is characterized as ‘primitive’. Even supposing it may be possible to make such a differentiation with some degree of certainty, why should a ‘sophisticated’ theology be regarded as chronologically later than a more ‘primitive’ outlook? Throughout history – and still today, in many religious traditions beside Christianity – simplistic beliefs have existed alongside more sophisticated and complex ones, and the acceptance of one or the other is more obviously related to personal choice and temperament than it is to any kind of time considerations. The theology of Paul (sophisticated by any standards) was certainly in existence before any of the gospels were written, and there is also some evidence to indicate that there was considerable diversity of theological expression in all the major centres of Christianity at the time. Had there not been, much of the rest of the New Testament would never have been written at all!

How many sources?

There are differences of opinion on points of detail, but this explanation of synoptic relationships is, in general outline, universally held by virtually everyone. But it has also been proposed that Mark and Q are not the only sources that can be traced in Matthew and Luke. The classic statement of this solution to the synoptic problem (certainly in the English-speaking world) was set out by B. H. Streeter in his 1924 book, The Four Gospels. He agreed that Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q, but suggested that it is also possible to trace two other sources, M and L. In effect this material was simply what is left of the accounts of Matthew and Luke once the Mark and Q material has been removed, but Streeter believed that these two collections of material were themselves separate and coherent sources of independent origin, and therefore could be used alongside the others when it came to assessing the historicity and value of the traditions.

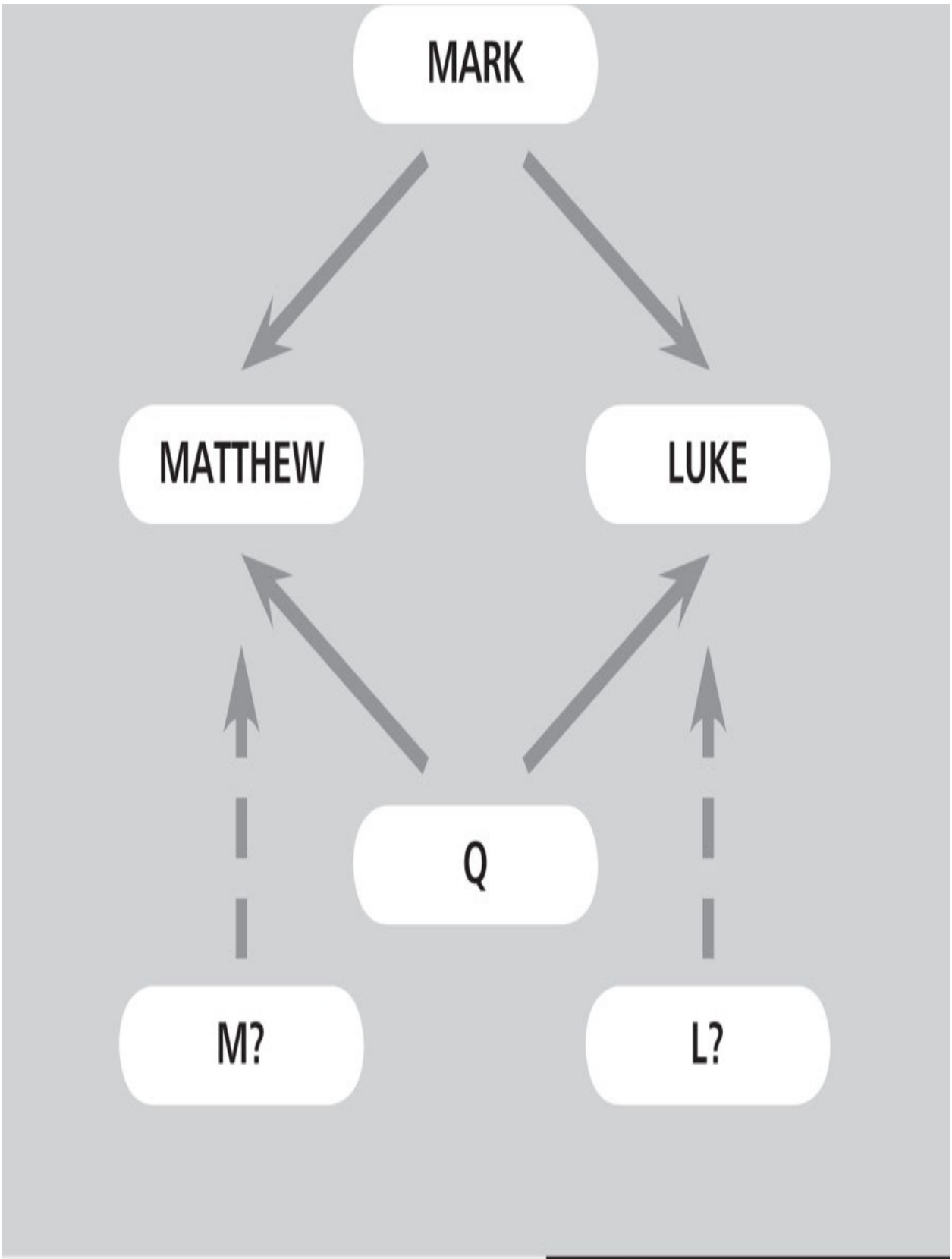
Streeter started with the fact that Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark in rather different ways. Matthew followed Mark's order and general framework very closely, though at the same time he frequently rewrote the actual material, and often condensed material from Mark to make more room for additional information. As a result, Matthew's Gospel looks rather like an enlarged edition of Mark. But while Matthew made use of almost all the material contained in Mark, Luke contains only about half of Mark's material. Furthermore, if all Mark's material is removed from Matthew then the residue has no obvious coherence and the book simply falls to pieces. But if the same thing is done with Luke, we are left with a reasonably consistent and continuous story. This is particularly true of the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection in Luke, which seem to have a different underlying shape than the corresponding narratives in Matthew and Mark, and appear to have been supplemented by information from Mark, rather than being based on Mark's outline. Streeter therefore proposed that before Mark was written, Luke must have compiled a first draft of his gospel, based on the sayings collection Q and the material labelled L, which he had obtained from the church at Caesarea where he stayed while Paul was in prison

(Acts 23:23–27:2). Streeter called this first draft ‘Proto-Luke’. Then, he suggested, when Luke was living in Rome at a slightly later date he got to know of Mark’s Gospel, which had been written in the intervening years, and he fitted extracts from it into his own already existing Proto-Luke. At the same time, he may also have added the preface (Luke 1:1–4) and the stories of Jesus’ birth in chapters one and two.

Several factors are consistent with this. For example, Luke often contains a different version of a story from Mark. The account of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth is a good example (Mark 6:1–6; Luke 4:16–30), in which it is obvious that both evangelists are reporting the same incident, but Luke’s account is so much fuller that it seems likely that he must have had a different source of information. Streeter also drew attention to the way that small sections of Mark’s narrative, often in Mark’s exact wording, appear to have been inserted into the middle of other material in Luke, creating the impression that they were later additions. It is also striking that a great deal of information contained in Mark is simply omitted in Luke, and Streeter argued that if Luke had known of Mark’s Gospel when he first wrote his own, he would have included more of Mark’s material in it. Another feature which this theory seemed to explain is the way that Luke appears to have two beginnings. The preface at 1:1–4 is followed by the stories of Jesus’ birth, but then the flow of the narrative is interrupted at 3:1, which reads like a fresh start with its careful dating of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry followed by the list of his ancestors in 3:23–38. If 3:1 was the original beginning of Proto-Luke, to which Luke later added what is now chapters 1 and 2, that could provide a credible explanation of this unusual feature.

The importance of this theory about the way Luke wrote his gospel lies in the fact that if there ever was a Proto-Luke, that would form another independent and early source of knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus. It has not, however, commanded anything like universal assent, though it continues to have its advocates. One of its major weaknesses is Streeter’s assumption that the gospels were written in a neatly defined, linear way. Like many scholars of his generation (and, indeed, more recently), he tended to think of the evangelists as if they were editors, cutting and pasting information from different sources. In the early twentieth century this notion was widely applied to the study of both

Old and New Testaments, often combined with an evolutionary perspective on literary development which supposed that tradition develops from more or less primitive forms to more sophisticated ones. Subsequent research has shown this to be a considerable over-simplification of the matter, both in terms of the practices of ancient writers and in relation to the nature of their sources (it could well have been, for example, that Luke was familiar with Mark's material, but not through Mark's Gospel in its present form). This is also a weakness in other suggestions that Streeter put forward. He argued not only that four identifiable sources can be traced behind the synoptic gospels, but that each of them represented the traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus as they had been preserved in the four most important centres of early Christianity: Mark was written in Rome, Q in Antioch, M in Jerusalem and L in Caesarea. If it could be demonstrated, this would be a neat way to understand not only the gospel traditions, but also some aspects of the life of the early Christian communities. But it was based on flawed assumptions, not least the idea that what Streeter called M and L were coherent documents. In reality, however, this is hardly the case: when Mark and Q material are removed from Matthew, what is left is not a coherent collection at all, and the same is true to a lesser extent of L, which is just Luke's Gospel minus Q and Mark.



Synoptic gospels and their sources.

These five factors are not all of equal importance, and it is not hard to pinpoint real or imaginary difficulties with some of them. But the cumulative effect of their evidence is most easily explained if we suppose that Matthew and Luke used Mark's account, rather than that Matthew was the original gospel which Mark summarized and from which Luke made selective extracts.

New approaches to old problems

In recent years much of the emphasis in New Testament scholarship has moved away from this sort of mechanistic analysis of the gospels towards a more holistic effort to understand their origins in the total context of the social experience of the early Christian communities. Though the two-source theory of gospel origins is still widely accepted, new angles are constantly being explored, some of which may well have a decisive influence on future understandings of the way the New Testament came to be written.

Did Q really exist?

Debates that seemed to have been settled a hundred years ago are being revisited and much of the evidence for the two-source theory is being looked at again. Was Mark really the earliest gospel? Did Q ever exist independently as yet another ‘gospel’? If so, why was it originally written, and what was its purpose? Is it really necessary to suppose that Q was a fixed collection of logia rather than just a looser collection of traditions known by both Matthew and Luke? There are certainly a number of unanswered questions, not least the reality that there is no hard evidence for Q ever having existed. In the nature of things, it would be unrealistic to imagine that an actual copy of it would have survived if its contents were incorporated into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. More significant, however, is the lack of any mention of such a document in writings from the early centuries of the Christian era. It is sometimes claimed that the Gnostic gospels offer a plausible model, though for theological reasons their interest in Jesus was entirely focused on his teaching whereas Q, while predominantly consisting of sayings of Jesus, also was not embarrassed to include a couple of narratives as well.

It may well be that this debate is actually a non-existent conundrum that derives from the assumption that ancient authors compiled their books in much the same way as today’s writers, working with access to multiple texts and cutting and pasting information from different sources in order to construct their own narratives. The reality for ancient authors was quite different, not only in terms of the materials they were using, and the regular employment of secretaries, but also the relationship between oral presentation and literary production. The connection of orality and literacy will be explored more extensively when we come to consider the letters of Paul, and while the gospels are clearly not the same genre as the letters it is worth asking whether the dominant approach to them both might be the product of a sort of media anachronism that projects the methods of the digital age back into the Roman world in a way that then predetermines our understanding of what these ancient authors were doing. There is in fact evidence from classical authors that they quite often relied on memory, their own or that of their colleagues, and at the very least we need to

allow that explanations based on today's literary models are not the only way to understand how stories and teaching came to be recorded differently in different gospels.

In spite of these misgivings, the consensus still favours the two-document hypothesis, according to which Mark was written first and Q had a more or less fixed form, in which it was used by Matthew and Luke independently. Given the nature of the evidence, there will always be room for disagreement, but for the present at least, most scholars are still prepared to believe that the balance of probability lies in believing that Q was a real gospel source, whose assumed existence solves more problems than it creates.

Looking behind the text

Once the two-source theory had been widely accepted as the most likely explanation of the mechanics of gospel writing, new questions began to present themselves. Identifying the various sources used by the evangelists in composing their accounts of Jesus' life and teaching only answered the question, where did the gospel come from? But there is also the further question, where did their sources come from? What was happening to the traditions about Jesus between his death and resurrection and their preservation in writing in the gospels?

These questions had occurred to a number of scholars in Germany even before Streeter published his classic work on gospel origins, and in trying to answer them, they came up with a new method of analysing the Bible literature. This was largely the creation of Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), who began his academic career as a professor of New Testament, though his most lasting reputation has been as a scholar of the Old Testament. His interests, however, also included the study of other traditional literature, as well as psychology and other emerging social science disciplines. He realized the Bible was not written in a cultural vacuum, and therefore it would be worthwhile to compare how its authors worked with what was known of the way other similar writings came into being. In particular, he observed that the literature of nations and movements always develops not in a self-conscious literary way, but as a natural part of everyday life. That means the lifestyle (not to mention the temperament and disposition) of those who write and read it plays a key role in its formation. Gunkel studied literary forms in the hope of being able to reach beyond the text to see how the books had been used in real life, and in the process to shed new light on the history of the text itself. This procedure was reflected in the term he used to describe his work, Formgeschichte, which literally means not 'form criticism' (the conventional translation), but 'form history'.

Gunkel's application of this method to the Psalms broke new ground, and New Testament scholars soon began applying it to the gospels, most notably K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolph Bultmann. Two well-established

conclusions on the writing of the gospels made this the obvious next step.

For centuries the gospels had been understood as straightforward stories about Jesus written to preserve a historical account of his deeds and words, but with the rise of critical study that was replaced by the view that the evangelists wrote for essentially pragmatic purposes to meet the needs of the early Christian communities. These needs mostly related to evangelization (sharing the Christian message with others), liturgy (regular worship), catechesis and paranesis (the teaching of Christians about their faith), and conflict resolution (on such topics as Christian attitudes to observance of the Jewish Law). On this understanding, the gospels were not comprehensive accounts of either Jesus' deeds or words, but were selective recollections about him chosen from a much larger pool of available material on the basis of relevance to significant questions and debates in the life of the early Christian communities. Two of the gospel writers actually said this was what they were doing (Luke 1:1–4; John 20:30–31, 21:25), though the likely implications of that had never previously been noticed.

Within this frame of reference, creating a continuous story of Jesus' life from start to finish was neither necessary nor appropriate. This is the sense in which it might be said that the early Christians had no particular interest in the 'historical Jesus'. To claim, as some have done, that it would have made no difference to their faith whether or not Jesus ever existed is absurd. But on this understanding, the evangelists were less interested in constructing a 'life of Jesus' than in saying something to demonstrate his relevance to the everyday experience of his followers. Again, Luke and John spelled this out clearly and there is no reason to suppose Matthew and Mark operated in any different way. This practical purpose had repercussions for the way the evangelists (particularly the synoptists) arranged their material in short paragraphs or sections (pericopes), with no obvious continuity of either narrative or argument running from one to the other. The apparent lack of connection from one pericopē to the next is so striking that K. L. Schmidt could refer to the individual sections as 'pearls on a string'. Even where stories seem to have been gathered together in blocks prior to their inclusion in the gospels, the basis of such collation was invariably topical rather than historical or biographical. So, for example, the material in Mark 2:1–3:6

consists entirely of stories about controversy, while Mark 4:35–5:43 is a collection of miracle stories and Matthew 5–7 is a block of teaching (the Sermon on the Mount). The only possible exception seems to be the story of Jesus' death, which has an internal argument and organization that may imply it was always preserved as one continuous story, though even that was probably related to apologetic concerns, namely the need to explain how a respected teacher could meet such an unexpected end.

Building on these established results of scholarship, form critics speculated that individual stories would be preserved in different 'forms', depending on their context and purpose. This 'life situation' (often described using the German, Sitz im Leben) would then determine the way in which things were expressed. The term 'form' referred to features such as the length of a particular pericopē, its structure, way of organizing material, and so on. This methodology had already been well tested in relation to the traditional folk literature of northern Europe, but form in this sense is still a familiar part of modern life. Think, for example, of the difference between a TV documentary and a game show. They might easily deal with the same subject (say, sport), but their approach is quite different. In fact, just by observing the structure of each programme viewers can instantly distinguish between the two, without needing to know anything at all about sport. In the same way, form critics suggested it is possible to identify the context in which particular sections of the gospels had been used in the life of the early church just by looking at their form. If this could be done reliably, it would of course be an invaluable aid to understanding the gospels, for if it was possible to know the use to which the various traditions were put in the early church, that would in turn illuminate their relevance to the church's life, and potentially reveal new dimensions of their essential meaning. Unfortunately the form critics failed to agree on this essential point, and though Martin Dibelius gave what has come to be regarded as the classic analysis of gospel forms in 1919, his five main forms have by no means been universally accepted by others. However, it is worth reviewing them here as they illustrate the sort of things that form criticism looks for.

Paradigms

Different scholars gave different names to these stories. Rudolf Bultmann called them ‘apothegms’, while Vincent Taylor more prosaically called them ‘pronouncement stories’. Whatever they are called, they certainly constitute a distinctive group of stories, distinguished by the way they all culminate with a punch-line. Some of them contain narrative, but the key thing is the pithy statement that comes at the end, and all other details are secondary. Several examples are found in the early chapters of Mark (see 2:1–3:6). This literary form was common in both Greek and Jewish literature of the time, and provided Christians with memorable sound bites to describe significant aspects of their beliefs. Dibelius believed that this form originated in the earliest Christian preaching, in which such stories would be used as examples and illustrations. In addition to the use of a striking saying as the culmination of such stories, they were also characterized by their tendency to minimize pictorial description in order to focus attention on the most important element, which was the saying of Jesus. When a story is handed on orally, two things may typically happen to it. Either it can be worn down by frequent repetition, so that little remains apart from the most essential facts expressed in as succinct and striking a way as possible – or the opposite can happen, with extra details being added to make it more realistic and interesting. Most form critics regarded the paradigms as having been worn down to their bare essentials, rather than being expanded in the process of transmission.

Tales

Dibelius defined these as stories told for the sake of being a good story, and he included many (though not all) of the miracle stories in this group. Others just called them ‘miracle stories’. Again, there were similar forms elsewhere in the first-century milieu, and it is not hard to imagine Christians utilizing them to highlight Jesus’ own powers as a means of authenticating his message. In these stories Jesus’ deeds are much more important than his words. Dibelius believed they were the work of professional storytellers in the early church, whose job was to cast stories about Jesus into the same form as the stories of Greek deities and heroes so as to win converts to the Christian faith by demonstrating that

Jesus was superior to other gods. The New Testament never explicitly mentions storytellers in the early Christian communities, maybe because this way of sharing faith was so common that its existence could be taken for granted. Given the general popularity of storytelling in the ancient world, not to mention the fact that Jesus' own most characteristic method of communication was in the telling of stories, it would be surprising if his followers did not self-consciously use the same approach. To suppose that the stories of Jesus were carefully crafted by professional storytellers is not to imply any particular opinion of their authenticity as portrayals of Jesus. Since the gospels themselves were written down in something less than a generation after the events they describe, there must have been limited scope for the free creation of fictitious details about him. But there can equally be little doubt that the stories of the gospels have, for the most part, been carefully crafted so as to capture the imagination of those who would read or hear them.

Legends

Dibelius chose this term because of its common use (in his day) to describe traditional stories about the lives of the saints, the main point of which was typically to provide a moral example for others to follow. The terminology itself was not intended to make any value judgment about the historicity of these stories, though Dibelius was of the opinion that they often would be fictitious. Their main function was to glorify the person they describe, rather than to report any factual information. Examples of this 'form' in the gospels would be Matthew 14:28–33; 16:13–23; 27:3–8; Luke 2:41–49.

Myths

For Dibelius, this term indicated stories in which a human person interacted with some other spiritual or supernatural world. He included only three gospel stories here: Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9–11 and parallels), temptations (Matthew 4:1–11 and parallel in Luke), and transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8 and parallels).

Exhortations

That is, teaching. There is of course a lot of teaching in the gospels, and there are very many diverse forms of it. But since he believed it was all used in the same context in the life of the church (the instruction of converts) Dibelius grouped it all together. The parables would obviously belong here, along with other sayings.

Challenging the consensus

Throughout the twentieth century, the methodology as well as the conclusions of form criticism was subjected to extensive appraisal. In the process, the method has been refined to meet some of the objections.

Some have questioned the appropriateness of the entire method. They point out that the early development of form criticism owed a great deal to theories about the compilation of north European folklore, which was not only separated by time and distance from the biblical writings but also originated in a very different cultural context that was arguably alien to the Semitic mindset. How relevant is it to extrapolate principles and theories from one culture and apply them to another at a different period of history? Bultmann addressed this concern by drawing attention to what he considered to be parallels to New Testament 'forms' in the works of Jewish rabbis, but virtually all his examples suffered from the same weakness, dating from a time much later than the New Testament. However, subsequent research has shown that the concept of literary forms was indeed known in Hellenistic writing both before and after the first century, and though some earlier claims may have been exaggerated the general models provided by form criticism are still of value, provided their limitations are recognized.

Even supposing that forms were a common device, have form critics sometimes been over-enthusiastic in their assumption that the biblical writers were so consistently and exclusively influenced by convention and custom in the way they spoke and wrote that a particular genre (or Gattung, the German term) always had the same terminology, style and Sitz im Leben? While this is in general a safe assumption, form criticism did not always make enough allowance for the distinctive and particular. In reality, passages that clearly share the same general form often also show considerable variation in detail, and by emphasizing the common elements it is all too easy to miss the distinctive intention of particular speakers or writers. One of the few things that all sources

seem to testify to is Jesus' difference from other teachers, not his similarity to them.

Form and content cannot be separated as easily as some form critics supposed, and to concentrate on form alone can be misleading. In theory, once the 'pure' version of a form has been identified (by, for example, comparative study of Greek, Latin, or Jewish literature), it should then be possible to check the extent to which any particular New Testament example departs from it, and thereby to identify some of the distinctive aspects of the New Testament's message. In practice, it is not at all easy to identify such pure forms. Dibelius and Bultmann both argued strongly in favour of using pure forms as the starting point, but in practice their categories were often not based on form at all, but on content. Dibelius's legends, myths, and exhortations were all classifications of content, not of form, and it is arguable that tales were as well (they are all miracle stories, though in this case the content does seem to be accompanied by a distinctive form). The only category to be unambiguously based on literary form was the paradigm. To take account of the obvious diversity of forms found in the New Testament, scholars today operate with a much more elastic definition of forms than Dibelius or Bultmann. But this raises a different set of problems, because the more flexibility there is, the less useful the whole analysis of forms becomes.

Form criticism has sometimes become a circular and self-validating form of study. An individual's prior understanding of how forms develop affects the way particular passages are read. Dibelius and Bultmann believed that over time the forms became more complex, while Taylor argued the exact opposite, that the stories and teachings were worn down with much repetition so that we are now left with the bare essentials. To see the impact of these different assumptions, we might think of study of the parables. It has generally been assumed that the parables all follow one form, and only ever make one single point. If so, it is a foregone conclusion that any additional points or 'explanations' of a parable's meaning must be later additions to the text. But if there was diversity in the forms, or if the evangelists were creative writers and not merely collectors of traditions, then this understanding would be at least questioned, and may be undermined completely. Self-validating arguments like this are not intrinsically without value: the formulation and testing of a hypothesis is a proven procedure

in many fields of research. But the constant challenging of the hypothesis is important, and this is what has often been lacking in New Testament study. In its original version, form criticism depended on the accuracy of Schmidt's notion that the evangelists were only stringing pearls together. Redaction criticism (which is discussed in more detail in the next chapter) has now shown that the string is at least as significant as the pearls, and that needs to modify the method.

Form criticism has also been criticized for paying too little attention to other types of evidence, notably historical commentary. For example, it was too easy to move from the observation that exhortations were preserved in a catechetical context in the early church, to the conclusion that much of the teaching of Jesus was invented by early Christians to answer their own ethical or theological questions. Moreover, it is not as easy as it seems to identify particular forms with specific life contexts and some scholars have questioned whether life settings do actually give rise to literary forms, insisting that it is rarely possible to correlate individual pericopes with particular life situations. Even if such an enterprise is possible, how can we be sure that we have identified the most useful parallels? For example, what assurance can there be that stories of Jesus' miracles had the same function as Hellenistic stories of divine wonder-workers that share the same literary form? How do we know that the forms of the Jewish world operated in the same way – particularly given the traditional Jewish concern for the accurate transmission of the teachings of the rabbis? In the 1960s, Birger Gerhardsson (1926–2013) argued for the complete rejection of form criticism on the basis that a Jewish concern for accuracy in preserving the teaching of rabbis meant that Jesus probably taught his disciples to memorize and repeat his teachings more or less word-for-word. More recently, in the effort to tread a middle path between the scepticism of form criticism and the literalism of Gerhardsson, scholars such as N. T. Wright and J. D. G. Dunn have emphasized the role of oral tradition, arguing that while oral storytellers might sometimes embellish the narratives that they repeat, when it is done within a stable community there is a definite limit to such creativity. Details may change, but the key features of a story will stay the same and their authenticity is guaranteed by the self-regulating memory of the community. This, it is believed, is enough to explain the way in which stories are recounted in different gospels, with varying details but the same general outline and often the same punch-line.

Insights from the past

Though some scholars regard such considerations as having dealt a death blow to the entire form-critical approach, a majority still agree that it offers useful insights into the gospels and their background, though as a method it needs to be applied with greater sensitivity to the nuances of the cultural context than has been the case in the past.

At the time of its development, form criticism was a corrective to the findings and attitudes of historical and literary criticism. There were some questions that these methods had been unable to address. They could not construct a literary history of the New Testament, nor were they able adequately to understand all the diverse contours of New Testament faith. The picture painted by historical and literary criticism turned out to be too simple and unilinear, partly because it studied the early church in isolation from its wider cultural and religious context and partly because it tended to impose a rigid evolutionary framework in which theological ideas could only develop in one direction, from simple to complex. Form criticism at least identified the right questions that would give access to the pre-literary period of the gospels, even though it now seems that time might have been much shorter than was once imagined.

Form criticism highlighted the fact that serious study must begin with understanding the nature of the literature we are reading, the literary category to which it belongs, and its characteristic features. This is particularly important when we recall that Jesus was operating in a cultural context with its own long literary history and traditions.

Form criticism set out to discover the function of literary genre in the life of the community or the individual, how and when it was used, and for what purpose. This is one of its features that is both a weakness and a strength. There will

certainly always be room for legitimate disagreement on this, as it is inevitably a circular argument if we use our present understandings of the forms to determine the needs that existed in the churches, and then to use these needs as a way of understanding and interpreting the forms. But as long as we regard such conclusions as tentative, there is nothing wrong with this. In any case, the rest of the New Testament gives at least some glimpses into what was going on in the early church, and can be used as a check.

The consensus at present is that those who want to reject form criticism out of hand are being too extreme. On the other hand, if form criticism is applied as if it were the only possible way to understand the gospels, then it can lead to unreliable – even absurd – conclusions. Past generations have sometimes made that mistake, and it is not for nothing that more recent scholars have supplemented it by redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, performance criticism, and other reader-oriented methods of understanding texts. Form criticism is now more likely to be regarded as just one part of the jigsaw though when balanced by other methods of investigation it still has useful insights to offer.

Who were the gospels for?

Following the insights of form criticism, the reason for there being four Gospels rather than just one came to be explained in terms of the different challenges faced by Christians in diverse social and religious contexts, and the need for these questions to be addressed using the stories and teachings of Jesus. Just as Paul and other Christian leaders wrote letters to inform and inspire faith in their readers, and to address their questions about lifestyle and beliefs, so the evangelists wrote their gospels for roughly the same purposes. Therefore, while their main intention may not have been to document the experiences of the various communities to which they belonged, it is nevertheless possible to discern within the nuances of the different gospels the distinctive concerns of the churches for whose use they were written. These assumptions arose from the form critical belief that social function can be read out of the literary form of a narrative, and in turn encouraged the development of redaction criticism as a discipline that would try to give a coherent account of the communities which produced the gospels in their final form. This way of understanding the gospels has been questioned, on several grounds.

It is argued that the gospels are a different sort of literature from the New Testament epistles, and that to apply the same methodology to understanding them is a fallacy. A full understanding of the epistles undoubtedly requires at least some knowledge of the various communities to which they were addressed, even if they may themselves then be used as sources for a more comprehensive understanding of the concerns of those same communities. But in the case of the gospels no such prior knowledge is necessary.

The idea that the evangelists would write only for other Christians implies a parochial mentality that other evidence does not support. Roman society as a whole was remarkably mobile, and Christian leaders travelled extensively, seeing the church as a worldwide movement and encouraging the various Christian communities not to remain separate but to communicate regularly with

one another in order the more effectively to encourage one another's faith.

It has also been argued that the only reason why scholars would have wished to identify the gospels so closely with specific communities emerged from their own loss of confidence in them as historical sources for the life and teaching of Jesus himself. This topic is dealt with in chapter 11. But, the argument goes, if the gospels tell us little or nothing about Jesus, they must still contain information about something – and that something must therefore be the life of their own communities, presented in quasi-allegorical form through the narratives about Jesus. If such scepticism is rejected, there would be no reason to suppose that the gospels were written for other Christians in specified locations: instead, they can be understood as general literature written for the same reasons as anyone might write a book, to communicate a message to as many people as possible, whether Christian or not.

The attraction of such an idea is clear enough, though the notion that the evangelists saw themselves as literary artists writing for anyone who would read their books raises its own questions.

The suggestion that the evangelists saw themselves as producing literature for wide circulation depends to some extent on the view that their gospels fit neatly into the category of Greco-Roman Lives which were usually intended for general circulation. But as we have already noticed, the gospels do not represent a pure form of this genre. They are more accurately described as religious works written with some of the style of the Lives than as biographical works written about a religious subject. The only two evangelists who explicitly spell out their purposes in writing both specifically say they were writing to encourage and nurture Christians in their already-existing faith (Luke 1:1–4; John 20:31).

The gospels for the most part do not actually speak a language that would automatically have been accessible to any readers who cared to pick them up.

They assume a community of common understanding, whose ways of expressing things was in many respects very different from the wider Hellenistic world. The extensive use of the Hebrew scriptures, not only in general terms but through the citation of specific quotations, presupposes some prior knowledge on the part of readers. The many nuances in the descriptions of Jesus, in which he can be compared to Old Testament characters, not to mention the use of technical terms, all implies an original readership with some knowledge of such matters. When, as in John's Gospel, the Jewish background is explained, it is done in a self-conscious way that implies it was not normally necessary – and, indeed, in the case of John was quite likely done at a time when the gospel was being reissued for somewhat wider circulation than had originally been intended.

Though it was a worldwide network, with many of its leaders travelling regularly around the churches, who must therefore have known of each other's existence, the early church was also a threatened minority group. In such circumstances, the preservation of the story of its own origins for its own internal support would have been a natural thing to do. With the likely exception of Luke, at least one purpose of the gospels was to provide reassurance and support to believers who were either suffering persecution or were feeling threatened in some way and who would value the support that could be given to them by the writing of their own gospel, which would show how their particular predicament was rooted in the origins of their group, and might be addressed by resources drawn from the experience of their founder, Jesus himself.

No doubt the gospels, like other Christian literature, did circulate among communities other than those for whom they were first compiled. There is evidence for the exchange of epistles, though only within local areas (Colossians 4:16), and it was not until nearer the end of the first century that wider collections of Christian writings were made. Of course, if the two-source theory of the origins of the synoptic gospels is correct, it also assumes that the evangelists had access to the writings of other people. But it is important to remember that though travel in the Roman empire was relatively straightforward, it would still only be the upper classes who were easily mobile, and that itself is probably sufficient to explain how Matthew or Luke could have laid hands on Mark's work or the hypothetical Q. The majority of Christians

were unlikely to have been literate, and they would first encounter the stories of the gospels not by reading them but by hearing them in their own church community. If others beyond the churches learned these stories, they would mostly do so by being introduced to such reading and story-telling sessions by their Christian friends in the places where they lived, which itself underlines the likelihood that as the stories developed they would be told in ways that had direct local relevance.

Study of the gospels is an ongoing enterprise in which the assured results of one generation are constantly being probed and questioned, if not abandoned, by those who come after them. It remains to be seen whether today's questions will still be important in the future as new questions arise, and of a different kind from those asked by earlier generations. One of the major shifts during the course of the last hundred years or more has been the recognition that, wherever the evangelists obtained their own information, each of them has written what is essentially an original composition, distinctive in important respects from the work of any of the others. Much of the interest is now focused on what the evangelists were doing, rather than on revealing the mechanics of how they were doing it. As a result, theological insights need to be used to supplement the earlier findings of the literary critics.

CHAPTER 10

FOUR PORTRAITS OF JESUS

Mark

Mark’s Gospel is considered first because it is now recognized as a basic source for the other two synoptic gospels, though it was generally neglected by the church in earlier centuries in favour of the longer accounts of Matthew and Luke. This is hardly surprising, for they contain most of Mark’s information and much more in addition, but the realization that Mark was almost certainly the first to be written has given it a prominence that it has probably never enjoyed until now.

The Peter connection

There is some evidence suggesting that Mark was valued in certain Christian circles not long after its composition. Papias (c. AD 60–130) identified Mark as ‘Peter’s interpreter’ and reported that ‘he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he could remember of the things said and done by Christ’ (quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.39.15). Irenaeus (Against Heretics 1.1.1) and Clement of Alexandria (in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History VI.14.6ff) also associated Mark’s Gospel with Peter and in more recent times the contents of the gospel have often been thought to support the belief that Peter was the source of much of it. Stories like the call of Peter (1:14–20), or of Jesus’ first sabbath in Capernaum when Peter’s mother-in-law was healed (1:29–34), are told with such vivid details that it is natural to regard them as first-hand accounts of the events they describe. In addition, some of the references to the disciples, and to Peter in particular, are highly unfavourable. The disciples are consistently portrayed as ignorant and obtuse, repeatedly failing to understand what Jesus was trying to teach them (4:35–41; 5:25–34; 6:37–38; 8:14–21, 31–33; 9:2–6, 32; 10:35–45). In Mark the disciples are not at all the kind of people the later church liked to think they were, and it is unlikely that they would have been depicted in such an unfavourable light had Mark not had good information, perhaps coming from Peter himself, to support such an impression.

Author

Mark, or Marcus, was a very common name, and he could have been almost anybody. In considering matters of authorship, the starting point has to be the fact that none of the gospels actually names its writer. John comes nearest to doing so, but even then it is only an enigmatic reference to a witness to the crucifixion (John 19:35), and though this person is often identified with the 'beloved disciple', it is also far from clear who that might have been. In this respect the gospels are quite different from most of the rest of the New Testament, for they are presented as anonymous writings. The traditional ascriptions to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were of course added at an early stage, but they represent the opinions of the early church about the authors of the gospels rather than any sort of claim by the authors themselves.

The author of the second gospel was generally identified by the early church with a person called John Mark who is known from other parts of the New Testament (Acts 12:12). According to Acts, a group of Christians regularly met in his mother's house in Jerusalem, and John Mark himself is named as the companion of Paul and Barnabas in their earliest missionary work (Acts 12:25; 15:37–41). Though Mark deserted them, Paul mentions him favourably in two of his later letters (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24), so they must have reconciled their differences. He is also spoken of with affection in 1 Peter 5:13 and that (depending on one's view of the authorship of 1 Peter) may be taken as evidence for associating him with Peter as well as with Paul. It is more difficult to be certain that this same Mark was actually the author of the gospel, though in view of the tendency of second-century Christians to associate books of the New Testament with key figures in the early church, it may well be that the tradition connecting Mark with this gospel is not entirely untrustworthy. John Mark was a very insignificant person and hardly someone who would be credited with writing a gospel unless there was good reason to believe that he did in fact do so.

Readers

A majority of scholars believe that Mark was written in Rome, to serve the needs of the church there. Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria disagree on the precise circumstances of its composition, but both agree it was written in Rome. If the author of the gospel was indeed John Mark, then other New Testament references also connect him with Rome. An alternative view holds that Mark was written in Galilee, close to the scenes of Jesus' own life, and an area that is mentioned at the very end of the gospel as a place where the work of Jesus might be continued (16:7). Galilee was a multicultural region of Palestine and its inhabitants would be familiar with Jewish traditions though Mark seems to assume a readership with no prior understanding of such things. Aramaic phrases such as talitha, koum or ephphatha are translated into Greek for the benefit of readers (5:41; 7:34), while Jewish customs are also explained in a way that suggests they were unfamiliar (7:3–4). There are also a number of Latin technical terms in Mark, which are more consistent with an origin in a part of the Roman empire where Latin was spoken (4:21; 12:42; 14:65; 15:19). So Rome seems the more likely place of writing.

Date

Dating this gospel is less straightforward, for several reasons:

The evidence of the church fathers is contradictory. Clement of Alexandria says that Mark wrote the gospel under Peter's dictation, and that the final draft of it was approved by Peter himself. But Irenaeus places the writing of the gospel after the deaths of both Peter and Paul. This means that we have to try to decide from the evidence of the gospel itself when it may have been written, which is no easy task.

It is often thought that the many references to trials and persecutions in Mark suggest that his readers were suffering for their faith (8:34–38; 10:33–34, 45; 13:8–13), which might date the gospel somewhere between AD 60 and 70 when Nero was blaming the Christians for problems in the city of Rome. But persecution was such a common feature of church life in the first century that it is not essential to connect Mark's Gospel with one of the more well-known persecutions. There must have been many local persecutions that have left little trace in literary sources, though they would be real enough to those who had to endure them.

Then there is the question of whether the apocalyptic section in Mark 13:1–37 presupposes that Jerusalem had already fallen to the Romans when it was written. Since this took place in AD 70, an answer to this question would at least date the gospel on one side or the other of that event. Here again opinion is divided, with those who prefer a Galilean origin claiming to be able to see cryptic references to that, and arguing that Christians in Palestine would be faced with the threat of persecution at that time.

A majority consensus places the date of Mark’s composition between AD 60 and 70, or just a little later.

Purpose

Mark's intention in writing is revealed in the key themes which appear in his gospel.

If this gospel had some connection with Peter, one reason for its composition could well have been the desire to preserve Peter's reminiscences as a lasting testimony for the church. This would be especially easy to understand if Mark wrote at a time immediately before, or just after, Peter's death. To this extent, Mark probably did have some kind of biographical purpose in view.

The theme of persecution also features in several passages relating to the nature of discipleship. The disciples and their faith, or lack of it, form a significant motif in the structure of Mark's narrative. Stories about them are used to introduce new aspects of Jesus' ministry in the main section of the gospel (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–13), and in the second half of the narrative the disciples are continually the focus of attention, playing a key role even in the final enigmatic paragraph of the entire book (16:7–8).

The failure of the disciples to appreciate that following Jesus would involve suffering is related to the way Mark presents Jesus as Messiah. The opening sentence confirms the importance of Messiahship for Mark's presentation of Jesus (1:1), and this theme is expounded in different ways throughout, sometimes in association with the title 'Son of God' (1:1; 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39), while at other times the 'Son of Man' terminology is more prominent (occurring no fewer than thirteen times between 8:31 and 14:62). Mark's understanding of Jesus' divine significance ('Christology') is always related to the themes of suffering and the cross: ultimately, it is through the cross that Jesus' true nature as Messiah is revealed.

Alongside the elevated descriptions of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man, Mark also presents Jesus as a very human figure: he can be angry on occasions (1:43; 3:5; 8:12; 8:33; 10:14); he is unable to perform miracles if the appropriate conditions of faith are absent (6:1–6); and he suffers physically in a way that might be thought incompatible with his position as the Son of God (8:31–33; 9:31). At one time these things were thought to be signs of Mark's 'primitive' theology, though that is not the only possible explanation. A better one may be to place it in the context of first-century debates about what it meant for Jesus to be regarded as both human and divine. Under the influence of a metaphysical dualism inherited from Greek philosophy, many Christians struggled to understand how God could have any contact at all with this material world, and resolved their problem by supposing that a divine Christ-spirit only entered the human Jesus at his baptism, and left him again before the crucifixion. Such people came to be known as Docetists, because they held that Jesus only seemed to be human (from the Greek verb dokeo, 'to seem'). This view was certainly current by the middle of the first century, and Mark could be responding to it by emphasizing that the divine Messiah was indeed fully human in the person of Jesus.

Style

The word for ‘way’ or ‘road’ occurs sixteen times in Mark, eight times in chapters 8–10, which is the central part of the narrative tracing Jesus’ progression from Caesarea Philippi, where he was recognized as the Messiah by Peter, to Galilee and thence to Jerusalem where he was crucified. The theme of the journey is used not just to expand on Jesus’ role as a suffering messiah, but also to highlight the fact that discipleship meant joining him on the journey, both literally and metaphorically. It was to be a journey full of the unexpected, something that is reflected in the urgency of Mark’s language as he moves abruptly from one episode to another, introducing them all with the frequent repetition of the word ‘immediately’. Why does Mark do this? At one time it was assumed that it was a consequence of his inadequate grasp of the Greek language, and even in an English translation the constant use of this word and the unexpected shift from one scene to another can be irritating. But what if these features are an intentional part of Mark’s style, related to the way in which his material was originally delivered to his readers? Most of them would not actually be readers at all as a majority of people in the Roman empire were not literate in any significant way, so if they were to engage with these stories it would be through hearing rather than reading. Placing these distinctive features of Mark alongside the essentially oral nature of the culture, some scholars are suggesting that this gospel was originally intended as an interactive dramatic production, with the journey motif providing continuity between the otherwise apparently disconnected stories and with the repeated occurrence of ‘immediately’ serving as a sort of stage direction to indicate a change of scene. In that context, Mark’s unusual Greek expressions would not be an indication of his lack of expertise in the language, but a conscious use of colloquial spoken Greek rather than an elevated literary style.

Ending

The best ancient manuscripts have Mark ending at what is now designated 16:8, which appears to be part-way through a sentence and is therefore often regarded as an odd way to conclude a book. There is no evidence that Mark was originally longer, though there have been suggestions that the final page was torn off at an early stage and lost, which would explain the efforts of later writers to make good the omission by adding either what is now known as the ‘longer ending’ of 16:9–20 or a somewhat shorter one which is indicated in the footnotes of most Bible versions. Mark 16:8 is certainly a dramatic and unexpected ending, especially since it means there are no resurrection stories in Mark, and indeed the resurrection is only hinted at in the most general way possible. This certainly cannot have been because Mark did not either believe or expect a final glorification of the crucified Jesus, for there are several passages elsewhere that point forward to precisely such an outcome for his ministry (9:2–8; 13:26–37; 14:62). It may be that the explanation is to be found in the secrecy motif that pervades Mark’s narrative, alongside the many stories that show the disciples failing to comprehend the full meaning of all that Jesus was saying, though some scholars believe that Mark was influenced by the structure of classical Greek tragedy and this conclusion was intended to be a particularly striking form of the denouement that regularly concluded such literature, after catastrophe had befallen the hero. This fits well with the notion that Mark was composed primarily for performance rather than reading, as the Greek tragedy was of course a play before it was a book. Viewed in that light, the unexpected ending halfway through a sentence would be an intentionally brilliant way of creating a space in which to engage an audience with the narrative, provoking conversation on the meaning and ultimate significance of the entire story.

Luke

Traditions associating the third gospel with a person called Luke date from as early as the second century. The Muratorian Canon and the anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke, as well as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian, all identify Luke as its author. The exact value of these traditions is, however, uncertain, since most of what they contain could just as easily have been deduced from the New Testament itself, and so they are not necessarily of any independent worth. The evidence of the New Testament itself is in fact more useful in identifying the author.

A distinctive feature of Luke is that it is not complete in itself: it is the first volume of the two-volume history of early Christianity which is continued in the Acts of the Apostles. The style and language of these two books is so similar that there can be no doubt they were the product of one writer, and both of them addressed to the same person, whose name is given as Theophilus (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1).

In Acts there are certain passages known as the ‘we passages’, so called because instead of using third person pronouns (they, she, he) the narrative uses the first person ‘we’ (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). Though it is never clearly stated who the ‘we’ are, it is generally taken to imply that the writer was present on these occasions, and therefore was a companion of Paul. Since the style of these passages is the same as that of the book as a whole, it seems likely that the author has used a personal travel diary as a source of information, and a careful scrutiny of the narratives shows that Luke is the one who best fits the evidence.

Luke is identified as a physician by Paul, and it has occasionally been proposed that the author of Luke and Acts displays a particular interest in the diagnosis of

illness – though it is likely that the limited medical terminology used would be familiar to any intelligent person in the Roman world. But there are some places where Luke seems to be more sympathetic than Mark to the work of doctors. This comes out very noticeably in the story of how Jesus healed a woman with an incurable haemorrhage. Mark 5:26 records that she had been treated by many doctors and then comments, somewhat cynically, ‘She had spent all her money, but instead of getting better she got worse all the time’, while Luke 8:43, on the other hand, simply comments that ‘no one had been able to cure her’ (RSV).

Luke is mentioned three times in the New Testament. On each occasion he is said to be a companion of Paul, and in Colossians 4:14 Paul says that he was not a Jew (see also Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). That would probably make him the only Gentile writer of the New Testament, and the Greek style of Luke–Acts certainly suggests that their author could have been a native Greek speaker. According to Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History II.4.6) Luke came from Antioch in Syria, and one ancient manuscript of Acts 11:28 implies that he was in Antioch when the church there received news of an impending famine. But the generally accepted text of Acts has Luke join Paul when he entered Europe for the first time. He also accompanied Paul on his final journey to Jerusalem, and then on to Rome itself. According to Streeter and others, Luke may have collected some material for his gospel during this period from the church at Caesarea – though his final version of it may well have been written in Rome.

Date

It is not possible to be certain of the exact date of Luke's Gospel. Since he incorporated in his own account some material from Mark, he must have written the final draft of his own book after the Gospel of Mark was written and in circulation, so the date given to Luke will depend to some extent on the date we assign to Mark. It has been suggested that Luke 21:5–24 displays a knowledge of the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD 70, and if so the finished gospel would need to be dated sometime after that.

Purpose

Why did Luke write this gospel? There has been extensive discussion of this, in relation to Luke in particular, and some key themes can be identified:

Luke articulates his purpose in the prologue (1:1–4), where he indicates that he was writing for a person called Theophilus, ‘so that you will know the full truth about everything which you have been taught’ (RSV). Moreover, he states that he undertook this work in a consciously literary manner, studying the accounts written by other people, and then compiling what he describes as ‘an orderly account’. While Luke was not solely motivated by biographical concerns, he emphasizes his intention to compile a historical record more clearly than any of the other evangelists.

Partly arising from this, Luke continually emphasizes that the events he describes are part of a much larger divine plan for the whole of history. The notion that God has a plan is repeated many times (1:14–17, 31–35, 46–55, 68–79; 2:9–14, 30–32, 34–35; 4:16–30; 13:31–35; 24:44–49, and in many other places). Luke makes explicit connections between his story of Jesus and the history of Judaism, and goes out of his way to demonstrate the continuity of Christianity with the Hebrew scriptures while also insisting that Jesus was the fulfilment of the ancient promises and so the old ways were now superseded. Right from the outset, he makes it clear that those who follow Jesus do not first need to become Jews in order to be Christians, but that Jesus had come to be ‘a light… to the Gentiles’ (2:32). By the time Luke was writing, Gentile Christians outnumbered Jewish ones and the relationship of Judaism and Christianity had become a significant issue. Luke depicts them both as part of a much bigger picture. His version of the story of salvation (often referred to by the German term Heilsgeschichte, ‘salvation history’) presents the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the mid-point of all time, the event to which the Old Testament was pointing forward, and from which all subsequent human life could take its meaning (2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 13:32–33; 19:5; 23:42–43).

Luke used this observation to bridge the gap between the events of Jesus' life and the concerns of the Christians for whom he was writing. He stressed this connection especially by his emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit as a key player in the drama of salvation. The Spirit features at significant points in the story (1:35; 3:15–18, 21–22; 4:1, 14, 16–18) and by underlining the way in which the Spirit operated both in the life of Jesus and in the ongoing life of the Christian community (24:49) Luke links together the two volumes of his writings, and in the process assures his readers that though Jesus the Messiah may be physically absent from the scene he is very much present through the continuing work of the Spirit. It may be that Luke emphasized the continuing presence of Jesus with his followers as a corrective to some of his contemporaries who were becoming impatient because the expected second coming of Jesus, the parousia, had not yet taken place. He reminded them that although his final appearance in glory is yet in the future, Jesus is with his people in a real way through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Another notable feature of Luke's Gospel is its emphasis on the nature of the community that was established by Jesus, and which continued through to his own day. In particular he stresses the inclusive nature of that community of disciples: the Christian message is for everyone. In recounting the story of the infant Jesus, Luke included the statement that he was to be 'a light to reveal [God's] will to the Gentiles' (2:32) and unlike Matthew who traced Jesus' ancestry only back to Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish race (1:1–17), Luke 3:28–38 went back to Adam, the common ancestor of all humanity. In Luke's account of the sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus' message was concerned with the Gentiles (4:16–30), and Luke also tells of Jesus' special interest in the Samaritans, who were especially despised by the Jews. Throughout this gospel Jesus is characteristically presented as the friend of the outcasts of society (9:51–56; 10:25–37; 17:11–19). These are the people whom God is happy to welcome, an attitude that is also recommended to Jesus' followers. The happiness of being a Christian is emphasized repeatedly. Luke begins with the angels bringing 'glad tidings of great joy' (2:10, KJV), and ends with the disciples returning to Jerusalem after the ascension 'with great joy' (24:52). In between these events, many of the most appealing of Jesus' parables

end on the same note of happiness. The parables about lost things (15:1–32) and many others emphasize the joy that is given to Jesus' disciples, while at the same time encouraging them to show the same openness to others as God had shown to them when they were themselves outside the kingdom.

Luke also expands the journey motif found in Mark, and here it occupies a full ten chapters (9:51–19:28). It becomes like a pilgrimage, with many others joining Jesus and the disciples, and an opportunity for teaching about the sort of change that adopting the values of God's kingdom will entail. This understanding of Christian discipleship as a journey was clearly important for Luke, and in the context of his narrative it sets the scene for other significant journeys yet to come, whether the one from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back (24:13–35) or the many journeys that give shape to the book of Acts.

Matthew

Matthew is very different from either Mark or Luke, and there are a number of special characteristics to be noted before we can say anything about its origin, date, or authorship.

Structure

The one thing that is immediately obvious about Matthew is that it is much more carefully crafted as a piece of literature than either of the other two Synoptics. Its structure presents a very well-organized arrangement of the material, which is generally set out in topics, though there have been many proposals about what the structure might be. There have been many variations on a proposal first made in the early part of the twentieth century by B. W. Bacon (1860–1932), who identified a series of five blocks arranged between the prologue of the birth stories and the epilogue of the passion narrative. Each of these sections concludes with the statement ‘when Jesus had finished these things…’, and each one combines narrative with teaching material in a way that looks as if it might have been intended to present Jesus as the new Moses, with these five central sections of the gospel corresponding to the five books of the Law in the Hebrew Bible (ascribed to Moses in Jewish tradition). Viewed like this, the structure of the gospel is as follows:

Introduction	1:1–2
Book 1. The new law: following Jesus	3:1–7
Narrative (Galilean ministry) 3:1–4:25	
Teaching (Sermon on the Mount) 5:1–7:29	
Book 2. Discipleship and Christian leaders	8:1–1
Narrative 8:1–9:34	
Teaching (on mission) 9:35–11:1	
Book 3. The revelation of the kingdom	11:2–
Narrative 11:2–12:50	
Teaching (parables) 13:1–52	
Book 4. The church and its administration	13:54
Narrative 13:53–17:27	
Teaching (life in community) 19:1a	
Book 5. Judgment	19:1b
Narrative (controversies in Jerusalem) 19:1–22:46	

Teaching (judgment on the Pharisees, apocalyptic teachings) 23:1–25:46
Conclusion 26:3–

It is certainly easy to make comparisons between Moses and Matthew's Jesus: both come out of Egypt and are saved soon after birth from a king who wants to kill them (Matthew 2:19–23; Exodus 1–2), both are placed on a mountain to deliver their most significant teaching (Matthew 5:1; Exodus 19:3), and both have shining faces reflecting divine glory (Matthew 17:2; Exodus 34:29–35). But Matthew never explicitly draws attention to these parallels, nor does he describe Jesus as a second Moses. Nor, for that matter, do the individual sections of the gospel correspond in any very exact way to the five books of the Pentateuch. In addition, on this analysis the crucifixion and resurrection end up as a concluding postscript rather than a major part of the book, which seems rather counterintuitive given their importance to the whole story.

Another way of looking at Matthew is in terms of content rather than literary style. By using the statements of 4:17 and 16:21 ('From that time on Jesus began to…') as structural markers, it is possible to trace not five divisions, but three, each of which is concerned to demonstrate how Jesus was God's Son and Messiah:

the person of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (1:1–4:16)

the proclamation of Jesus' Messiahship (4:17–16:20)

the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah and Son of God (16:21–28:20).

This has the advantage of reinstating the passion narrative to a central position, though it is questionable whether the statements in 4:17 and 16:21 can bear the

structural weight placed upon them, while there is also the fact that they are not specifically unique to Matthew, for both of them are taken over from Mark. Other more speculative attempts to explain the structure of this gospel involve various linguistic and mathematical formulae and comparison with Jewish lectionaries. While it is the case that Matthew's material is often grouped in series of threes, fives, and sevens, this may just have been intended as an aid to memorization rather than as a cryptic clue to the organization of its material.

Purpose

While the exact nuances of Matthew's structural procedures may be elusive, there are several distinctive emphases that are unique to this gospel.

Compared to the others, Matthew has a clear orientation towards the Old Testament and its relationship with the Christian message. Matthew presents the life and teaching of Jesus as the fulfilment of the ancient scriptures not just in the general sense that Jesus is 'the son of David' but with extensive reference to specific texts. Matthew wanted to show that Jesus had fulfilled all that happened to the nation of Israel, and to prove it he often quotes scriptural passages in ways that can seem to stretch credulity. For example, when Matthew reports Jesus' return from Egypt to his homeland as a baby, he quotes Hosea's statement about the exodus of Israel from Egypt: 'I have called my son out of Egypt' (2:15, author's translation; see Hosea 11:1). The methodology whereby the Old Testament is being used may be unclear to today's readers (in fact, it reflects typical Jewish exegetical practices of the time), but the message is clear: everything that was central in the relationship of God with the people of Israel has now found its true and final expression in the life of Jesus.

Alongside this is an affirmation of Jewish religious practices. Matthew's Jesus challenges the ostentatious and self-righteous way that things like prayer, fasting, and keeping the sabbath were sometimes practised, but does not condemn or contradict these aspects of traditional devotion.

It is therefore rather surprising to find that alongside this strong Jewish interest there is a considerable emphasis on the universality of the Christian message. The faults of Judaism are not passed over in silence, indeed Matthew contains the most scathing criticisms of the Pharisees found in any gospel (23:1–36), while there are other passages indicating that Israel's day as God's people has

now passed (8:10–12; 21:43). But this is all balanced by a striking emphasis on the missionary work of the church which becomes most explicit in Jesus' final words to the disciples (28:16–20) but is implied right from the very beginning, in the story of eastern rulers travelling to pay homage to the infant Jesus (2:1–12).

There is also a distinctive interest in eschatology here, and the teaching on this subject in Matthew 24 and 25 is a lot more extensive than the corresponding sections of the other synoptics. Matthew has a number of parables on the subjects of the second coming and last judgment that are not found elsewhere, most of them concerned to encourage readers to live in a state of constant readiness for Jesus' return, because 'you do not know the day or the hour' (25:13). Perhaps some Christians known to Matthew were beginning to doubt that Jesus would return, and for them parables like that of the ten bridesmaids would emphasize that such an attitude could lead to even those who thought they were disciples being unexpectedly excluded from the kingdom.

Another striking characteristic is Matthew's concern with Christian community and discipleship. It is the only gospel where the actual word 'church' (Greek ekklēsia) occurs (16:18; 18:17), and this fact alone probably contains the clue to the purpose of the whole book. Matthew was making a collection of Jesus' teachings in a form that could be utilized in the ongoing life of the church. It was a compendium of authoritative advice for both new converts and older believers as they tried to put their Christian faith into practice in their everyday lives. It undoubtedly succeeded in this last aim, for it was not very long before Matthew was the gospel most widely used and respected. It contained Jesus' teaching in a form that could easily be understood by new converts, and would provide the basis of their instruction in the Christian faith. It also demonstrated the continuity between Jesus and the Hebrew Bible in a very direct way, and so could be a useful handbook for dealing with questions raised by enquiring Jews, as well as helping Christians from a Jewish background to integrate their new faith with their heritage. Though it is not the longest of the gospels, it had the added advantage of being the most comprehensive. Since it contained almost all of Mark, and much of Luke, its position as the most important gospel was soon assured in the early church.

Author

There is no widespread agreement on who wrote this gospel, and when. Many scholars readily accept the early Christian traditions identifying Mark and Luke with the other two synoptics, but with Matthew the position is rather different. For the Matthew whose name was associated with this gospel by later church leaders was a disciple of Jesus, and therefore an eyewitness of the events described. It is not easy to see why one of the twelve disciples should have relied so heavily on the Gospel of Mark, which was written by someone who was not a witness of the events of Jesus' life, especially when the story of Matthew's own calling is told in 9:9–13 in a version that is largely copied from Mark 2:13–17. Other arguments against Matthean authorship are less substantial. For example, it has been claimed that, as someone obviously steeped in Jewish ways, Matthew would not have known enough Greek to compose such an impressive work in that language. But he was a tax-collector, and therefore a close partner with the Romans, and in any case Greek was much more widely known and spoken even in Palestine than was at one time thought likely. Others have proposed that Matthew must have been written by a Gentile, because of its universalism and a handful of apparent misunderstandings of Jewish practices. However, the complaints against traditional Jewish attitudes are very much in line with statements made by the Hebrew prophets, while the sort of mistakes allegedly found here (misunderstanding of the nature of Hebrew poetry in 21:5–7, the idea in 18:34 that torture was a Jewish practice, which it was not, and others like them) are hardly convincing evidence for a Gentile author. As with all the gospels, knowing the exact identity of the author is not going to be crucial for understanding it. The book itself is anonymous, and makes no claim at all about its author. We can be fairly certain it would be a man, but whether he was associated with the apostle Matthew, and at what stage or in what way, is impossible to say with certainty.

Date

The date of the gospel is also in doubt, and depends on the answers to a number of other questions.

If the two-source hypothesis about synoptic origins is correct, then Matthew must have been written after Mark and after the collection of sayings known as Q was in existence.

It is widely believed that Matthew was written later than Luke, because 22:7 and 24:3–28 appear to contain direct references to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. This presumption of course depends on the belief that there can never be such a thing as genuine predictive prophecy, and therefore if Jesus appears to have foretold an event in the future this means the early church must have rewritten the tradition in the light of later circumstances. Even if the possibility of such foresight is allowed, though, Matthew was clearly an intentional literary artist of some skill, and might easily have formulated the actual phraseology to reflect the details of what happened when the temple was destroyed in fulfilment of an earlier prediction.

It has also been argued that the type of church organization envisaged in Matthew is well developed, and therefore reflects a stage towards the end of the first century. Like all arguments based on the notion of ‘development’, this one is easier to propose than it is to substantiate. When the details of Matthew’s teaching on the church are compared with, say, Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth in the mid-fifties of the first century, it is very difficult to find any major differences between the two.

Some passages (5:10–12, 10:17, 23) seem to imply a time when Christians were being persecuted by authorities in the Jewish synagogues.

Putting all these factors together, a majority of scholars date Matthew sometime in the period between about AD 80 and 100, and written in a context where Christians were still very much conscious of their origins within Judaism, and indeed thought of themselves as a Jewish Messianic sect rather than an entirely different faith community, albeit one with a concern for reaching out to Gentiles. This fits the circumstance in northern Palestine towards the end of the first century, and is consistent with the fact that the earliest known reference to Matthew was made by Ignatius of Antioch in the early years of the second century.

John

John is quite different from the other three gospels. Its style of writing is more reflective than the immediacy of the others, while its presentation of Jesus is quite distinctive. Instead of spending most of his life in the relative obscurity of Galilee, Jesus is a regular visitor to the festivals in the temple at Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 10:22; 11:55), where he continually debates and discusses with the religious authorities the finer points of scriptural interpretation and spirituality. Instead of speaking about his possible identity as Messiah in a hesitant way, he makes openly messianic claims from the outset, and in a series of seven sayings introduced by the words ‘I am’ he appears to assume for himself the traditional authority that was reserved in the Old Testament for God alone (where God’s personal name Yahweh had been defined as meaning ‘I am who I am’, Exodus 3:13–15). Instead of speaking in parables about the kingdom of God, he talks in extended discourses about ‘eternal life’ – discourses where (since ancient Greek had no equivalent of modern quotation marks) it is incredibly difficult to decide where the speech of Jesus is meant to end and the reflections of the evangelist himself might begin. Some familiar synoptic episodes such as the casting out of the money-changers from the temple are placed in a different context, while others are not mentioned, though the meaning of them seems to be referred to. So, for example, the Last Supper is dominated by the washing of the disciples’ feet by Jesus (13:1–20), while the idea that bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ is expounded in a discourse following the feeding of the 5,000 (6:25–58). The other gospels to varying degrees present the cross as tragic, albeit inevitable, but in John it is depicted as Jesus’ final glorification, the one thing above all others that demonstrated his oneness with God and his place in God’s plans for the cosmos – a universal aspect of his significance that is also emphasized in the opening paragraphs, where Jesus is identified with the universal logos (word, or reason) of Greek philosophical speculation (1:1–14).

Structure

All this is set out in a carefully constructed narrative, with three easily recognizable sections sandwiched between a prologue and an epilogue, as follows:

Prologue (1:1–18)

This sets the scene, perhaps with references taken from some early Christian hymn or confessional formula, but certainly with allusions to the story of creation in the book of Genesis, to the Old Testament figure of Wisdom as a mediator of God's presence in creation, and drawing connections between these themes and the concepts of Greek philosophy – all of them designed to highlight the cosmic significance of the person of Jesus.

Book of Signs (1:19–12:50)

Here the key events of Jesus' ministry are organized by themes and topics, highlighting in particular his growing conflicts with the religious establishment in Jerusalem, and in the process affirming the fact that as Son of God he was the fulfilment of all the expectations of the Old Testament.

Book of Glory (13:1–20:31)

Through a series of private meetings with his disciples, including extensive discourses, Jesus prepares them to be leaders of the infant church, nurturing their

own faith and entrusting them with guidelines for the future life of the Christian community. As the culmination of all this the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection gather up the other themes of this gospel, and whereas sacrificial overtones are present in the synoptic accounts of the cross here it becomes yet another manifestation of Jesus' divine nature.

Epilogue (21:1–25)

The book concludes with more personal encounters between the disciples and the resurrected Jesus, including a cryptic statement about the one who was the source of the information in this gospel. It seems to be an addition to the original composition, though by the same author, maybe at a time when it was issued for a new readership (see below for more discussion of this and related issues).

Character

The striking nature of the differences between this gospel and the others has, not surprisingly, led to heated debates about the relative value of their respective accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. A hundred years ago it was taken for granted that John was the product of a second-century theological interpretation of the life of Jesus, carefully crafted for apologetic purposes to commend the Christian faith to a speculative Roman readership, but for that reason having little or no value as a reliable account of Jesus as he might actually have lived and taught. This opinion is now seen to be flawed, for several reasons.

Fact, fiction, and storytelling

To suppose that, if the synoptics give a ‘true’ picture of Jesus, John’s picture must be ‘false’ is to set up an artificial dichotomy between the two that, if it ever did have validity, would have been more appropriate to the mechanistic view of science popularized by the rationalist-materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment than to the understanding of literary compositions within the context of the Roman empire. We have already seen that the New Testament gospels cannot be simply categorized as ancient biography (though John has more of the characteristics of that form than the other three), but they are certainly carefully crafted narratives aiming to tell the story of Jesus’ life and teaching. As such, they are to be judged not by the standards of scientific enquiry, but according to the practices of storytelling, in which the ‘truth’ of a narrative is to be judged as a whole on its own terms rather than in relation to notions of truth and falsehood drawn from some other sphere of human endeavour. The early Christian communities clearly had no problem in accepting that there were many ways in which the story of Jesus could be told authentically – otherwise they would certainly not have tolerated the existence of four gospels which, for all their similarities, are sufficiently different from one another as to defy all attempts at producing one harmonized, ‘factual’ version of the life and teaching of Jesus from them. They knew what more recent interpreters have often forgotten, that both artists and historians operate under similar constraints

as they seek to balance bare fact with creative elaboration, and that the telling of a good story that can speak to the hearts and minds of its hearers or readers depends on the coherent combination of both these elements. While all four gospels combine literal reporting with creative storytelling, the fourth gospel appears to have a greater preponderance of the latter. Perhaps, it might be suggested, this is one reason why, of all the gospels, it has had the power to speak more profoundly to a greater variety of people in different times and places than the other three – because it presents its subject matter from more angles than the synoptics. We return to this topic in the next chapter, when we discuss more extensively the reliability of the gospel traditions.

John and the synoptic gospels

At one time it was widely assumed that the author of John's Gospel knew the synoptic gospels, because a number of stories are common to both. The feeding of the 5,000 (6:1–15; see Mark 6:30–44 and parallels) and the story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany (12:1–8; see Mark 14:3–9 and parallels) are examples. Even in the earliest centuries it was therefore supposed that John was writing a kind of 'theological' interpretation of the more 'factual' stories of the synoptics: Clement of Alexandria, for instance, characterized John as a 'spiritual gospel' in comparison to the 'physical' or 'bodily' accounts of the synoptics (quoted in Eusebius Ecclesiastical History VI.14.7). This led to the conclusion that the fourth gospel must be late in date and inferior in quality to the synoptic gospels. However, in the light of more recent study it is obvious that it is too simplistic to set the 'history' of the synoptics over against the 'theology' of John, for the synoptic writers were themselves theologians and did not compose their gospels for purely historical reasons but because they had a message for their readers. It is also now widely believed that the fourth gospel is not dependent on the other three, and may well have been written without any knowledge of them.

Closer examination of the stories found in all four gospels shows that though there are similarities, there are also a number of differences, and these differences are not easily explained on theological or ideological grounds. John's

variations are much easier to understand on the assumption that he had access to different reports of the incidents known also to the synoptists. When this hypothesis is tested in detail, it can be seen not only that John's account comes from a different source, but also that there are a number of pieces of information in John which can be used to supplement the information of the other gospels in such a way as to make the whole story of Jesus' life and ministry more understandable. For example, John 1:35–42 mentions that some of Jesus' disciples had previously been followers of John the Baptist, an observation that can help to explain the exact nature of John's witness to Jesus in the synoptics, and especially the emphasis placed there on his role in 'preparing the way of the Lord'. John's account also helps to answer the question (not obvious from the synoptics) of what Jesus was doing between his baptism and the arrest of John the Baptist. The synoptics report that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee after John's arrest (Mark 1:14; Matthew 4:12; Luke 4:14–15). This is the only ministry recorded in the synoptic gospels, though during his last visit to Jerusalem Matthew and Luke (Q) report that Jesus said of its inhabitants, 'How often would I have gathered your children together…' (Matthew 23:37, RSV; Luke 13:34, RSV), which suggests that Jesus had visited Jerusalem on a number of previous occasions. John 2:13–4:3 tells of just such an occasion, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he worked alongside John the Baptist in Judea before returning to Galilee when John was arrested.

John 7:1–10:42 expands the synoptic material at a later point, when it records another visit by Jesus to Jerusalem some six months before his entry on Palm Sunday. John tells how Jesus left Galilee and went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (September) and stayed there until the Feast of Dedication (December) after which, because of growing hostility, he returned to the area where John the Baptist had worked (10:40), only making a brief visit to Bethany when he heard that Lazarus had died (11:1–54). A little later, six days before the Passover (April) he returned for his final visit to Jerusalem (12:1, 12). This is the only one recorded in any detail in Mark, though the others are perhaps implied by Mark's summary statement: 'he left [Galilee] and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan' (Mark 10:1, NRSV). John also provides a number of smaller details which explain and clarify some points in the synoptic narratives. At the end of the feeding of the 5,000, Mark 6:45 records that Jesus compelled his disciples to escape on a boat while he himself dismissed the crowd, while John 6:14–15 adds the detail that Jesus had to take this action because the crowd

were eager to kidnap him and make him their king. We have already noticed in chapter 7 how the stories of the Last Supper and of Jesus' trials can be fully understood only in the light of information contained in John's Gospel. And in view of evidence of this sort, it is now appreciated that John is a source of information about Jesus in its own right with information that is independent of the synoptic gospels, but which complements the other three in ways that add to the construction of a bigger picture.

Origins

Early traditions place the origin of this gospel in Ephesus and it was taken for granted that its background was in the wider Hellenistic world, especially in view of the prologue (1:1–18) which explains the incarnation in terms of the word or logos (a favourite theme of Greek philosophy). More recent study has shown that the background of much of John's Gospel is Jewish, and not exclusively Greek. Apart from the fact that Hellenistic culture is now known to have been all-pervasive throughout the Roman empire, even in Palestine, it is interesting to note that if the prologue is removed from John there is little in the rest of it that demands a Greek background. Not only is there an emphasis throughout the gospel on the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures, but the writer states his purpose in a very Jewish form: 'these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God' (20:31, author's translation).

This impression is confirmed by a closer analysis of the actual language of the gospel, for at many points the Greek shows a close connection with Aramaic sources. Aramaic words are used – for example, Cephas (1:42), Gabbatha (19:13), or Rabboni (20:16) – and then explained for the benefit of Greek readers. Even the meaning of the word Messiah is given a careful explanation in 1:41. There are also places where the Greek of the gospel follows the rules of Aramaic idiom. Though the distinction is not generally made in modern translations, such an instance occurs when John the Baptist says of Jesus, 'I am not worthy that I should untie the thong of his sandals' (1:27; the other gospels have a different and correct Greek expression, meaning more straightforwardly 'to untie'). Jesus' sayings in John are also on occasion expressed in the typical parallelism of Semitic poetry (12:25; 13:16, 20), while other sections of his teaching can be retranslated into Aramaic to form completely realistic Aramaic poetry (e.g. 3:29–30). It is not likely that John is a direct translation of an Aramaic document, though some have proposed this. But these facts do suggest that the teaching in John has the same Palestinian background as the material of the synoptics, while the curious use of Aramaic grammar in Greek writing may suggest that Aramaic was the author's native language. External evidence also

points in the same direction:

The Dead Sea Scrolls have shown that the combination of Greek and Jewish ideas found in John was current not only in Greek cities like Ephesus in the second century AD but also in Palestine itself, and in strict Jewish circles in the pre-Christian era. Many phrases familiar from John are also found in the scrolls, such as ‘doing the truth’ (3:21), ‘walking in darkness’ (12:35), ‘children of the light’ (12:36), or ‘the Spirit of truth’ (14:17). Moreover, the contrasts made in John between light and darkness, truth and error, are also typical of the Qumrân scrolls, and in both contexts this dualism between light and darkness, truth and error is an ethical dualism, in contrast to the metaphysical emphasis of most Greek and Gnostic philosophies.

The discovery of Gnostic gospels has had a different kind of impact on study of John. Prior to the discovery of the Coptic Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt, knowledge of Gnosticism was based largely on information given by a number of church historians and theologians who wrote books to refute it, and from their statements it was not too difficult to imagine that John could have been written in the second century as a part of the battle between Gnostic and ‘orthodox’ Christians. But the knowledge derived from the writings of Gnostic teachers themselves has demonstrated that there was a vast difference between the world of John’s Gospel and the world of classical Gnosticism.

Archaeological excavations in Jerusalem have also provided evidence to illuminate the traditions of John’s Gospel. One of the unusual features of this gospel is its proliferation of names and descriptions of places, and it was widely thought at one time that these names were introduced either as symbols to convey theological meaning or to give the impression of authenticity in otherwise fabricated accounts. In reality, this geographical information rests on authentic knowledge of the city as it was before AD 70. Since the Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem at that time, a later visitor to the city would not have been able to observe the ruins and imagine what it must have looked like

beforehand. Excavations in Jerusalem show that descriptions of the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–18), for example, or ‘the Pavement’ where Jesus met Pilate (John 19:13) are based on intimate knowledge of the city during Jesus’ lifetime.

Purpose

In one sense this is an easy question to answer, for 20:31 spells out the purpose: ‘that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name’ (RSV). Though that can be understood as a statement of some evangelistic purpose, which would mean the gospel was written for those outside the church, the first clause could also be translated ‘that you may continue to believe’, and other factors also seem to indicate that it was written with the needs of Christians in view.

There are extensive references to the concerns of second-generation Christians who were not eyewitnesses of the events described (20:26–31), with specific mentions of persecution (15:18–25; 16:1–4), mission (14:12–14; 15:26–27; 17:15–19), the need for continued faithfulness (15:1–11; 17:11–12), unity and love within the community (15:12–17; 17:20–23), as well as extensive teaching throughout chapters 14–16 on the role of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing life of the church.

There is a strong emphasis on the distinction between ‘Jews’ and Christians here. This is clearly not a racial distinction, as ‘Jews’ are not contrasted with Gentiles – and of course Jesus himself and all his family and first disciples were Jews. The emphasis rather is on religious differences: there is Jesus and his followers on one side and ‘the Jews’ on the other. This language has given rise to anti-Semitism, and was often quoted by Nazi propaganda in the 1930s. In the context of the gospel, though, it is intended as a designation for certain religious leaders who were hostile to Jesus’ message. Even so, the intensity of the language is unmistakable and it is widely believed that it derives from the fact that at the time when John was written there was considerable hostility between Jews and Christians. Passages like 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2 imply a complete separation between Judaism and Christianity, and some believe they reflect the situation around AD 85–90 when Christians were expelled from the synagogues as a consequence of a prayer against heretics formulated by Rabbi Gamaliel II. If so,

this experience was clearly in the past at the time the gospel was written, though its recipients (who seem to have included Gentiles as well as Jews) were still living with the painful memories of such an event.

Author and date

The question of authorship has always been somewhat confused. Early church traditions mention two Johns in connection with the gospel: the apostle, and a John whom they call ‘the Elder’. In the gospel itself the ‘beloved disciple’ appears to be a source of some of the information, though he is never categorically identified. Irenaeus identified the beloved disciple with John the apostle (Against Heresies I.1.1), though some interpreters believe he may just be an ideal figure, symbolic of the true follower of Christ, while others have pointed out that Lazarus is the only person of whom it is specifically and consistently said that Jesus loved him (John 11:5, 36). In addition, 21:24 appears to distinguish the final editor of the gospel from this ‘beloved disciple’, while implying that he was the source of much of its information.

One way of explaining all this is to suppose that John has gone through two editions. Apart from the prologue, it focuses on issues related to the Jewish background and heritage of Christianity, whereas the prologue gives it the feel of a book more suited to the wider Greek world. Could it be that the prologue was added after the completion of the original work, to commend the gospel to a new readership, facing relational issues with the synagogues well beyond the original context of Palestine? This possibility can also be supported by the odd connection between chapters 20 and 21. The last verse of chapter 20 reads like the natural conclusion of the book, though it is then followed by the post-resurrection instructions of Jesus to Peter in chapter 21. This final chapter may have been added at the time when the book was adapted to serve the needs of a new group of people, though its style and language is so close to that of the rest of the gospel that it must have been composed by the same person or persons. It seems at least possible that the gospel was first written in Palestine, to demonstrate that ‘Jesus is the Christ’ (20:31, RSV), perhaps over against the views of sectarian Jews influenced by ideas like those of the Qumrân community, and then when the same teaching was seen to be relevant to people elsewhere in the empire it was revised, with Jewish customs and expressions being explained and the prologue and epilogue added. The advice to church leaders in chapter 21 suggests that the final form of the gospel may have been

directed to a Christian congregation comprised of both Jews and Gentiles somewhere in the Hellenistic world, perhaps at Ephesus.

The date of the gospel is not easy to ascertain, partly because (unlike the case of Matthew and Luke) there is no other evidence against which to set it. Traditions from the second century onwards suggest that it was written by John the apostle at the end of a long life, and most scholars continue to date it somewhere between about AD 85 and 100, though opinions differ regarding the possible connection of it with the apostle John. He cannot have been the final author, for that was a group of people who identify themselves as at least second-generation Christians (21:24). Nor are there any specific indications that he was the 'beloved disciple', though a plausible case can be made out for that. However, there is no widely accepted opinion on the author's identity, and the consensus at this point in time can best be described as an open-minded agnosticism, with many scholars willing to allow some direct connection between John the apostle and the fourth gospel, though few wishing to be more precise than that.

Redaction criticism and gospel origins

Redaction criticism is an approach to understanding the gospels that built on the findings of source and form criticism. These other approaches attempted to uncover the very earliest beginnings of the stories about Jesus and to trace the history of the material before it was incorporated into the gospels themselves, and redaction criticism set out to discern how the individual authors actually used the materials that were handed down to them, and from which they constructed their gospels. All the claims about the aims, purposes, and special interests of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that are reported in this chapter are based on the conclusions of redaction criticism. Redaction is just a way of referring to editing and this approach begins from the assumption that it is possible to distinguish between the traditions that the evangelists used and the way they themselves actually shaped those traditions in the process of compiling their own distinctive accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. It then assumes that the way the individual evangelists have used their materials can reveal something about their own concerns, insights, and theological perspectives.

The ability to compare how different evangelists have used the same material is obviously an important part of this process, which is why it is much easier to discern the redactional concerns of Matthew and Luke than it is of Mark or John, because we know that Matthew and Luke were working with the same sources (Mark and Q). By identifying changes of wording, and analyzing which materials an evangelist has included and which have been left out, as well as the editorial connecting phrases that are used to link it all together, it is possible to discern patterns and then to conclude that those patterns must correspond with some particular concern of the author. For example, Luke not only contains more material on prayer than the others, but he also inserts references to prayer in passages which in Mark make no mention of it (compare, e.g., Mark 3:7–18 with Luke 6:12–19). When such features keep on recurring, it is reasonable to suppose that they reflect a particular theme which the evangelist wanted to emphasize (as Luke does with prayer). Some of these conclusions are bound to be more reliable than others. For example, discerning trends in how Matthew

and Luke have used Mark will always be easier than doing the same for their use of Q, since there is no independent access to what Q might have been in its original form, as there is for Mark. But that should not be used to question the method, which when judiciously applied has led to significant and creative insights into the evangelists and their overall concerns. Far from being the wooden cut-and-paste editors that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars imagined them to be, all four of them were obviously creative literary artists, carefully constructing their narratives so as to address their readers in ways that would impact their lives.

CHAPTER 11

CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?

In studying the life and teaching of Jesus we have taken it for granted that we can actually learn something about him from the gospels of the New Testament. We have suggested that, though the gospels share some of the characteristics of ancient Lives, or biographies of heroes, their ultimate purpose was not to give a comprehensive account of all that could be known of him but rather to provide selective presentations of aspects of his words and actions that would assist Christians in addressing key concerns within their own communities, while at the same time providing resources that would equip them for their mission in the wider world. We have not taken that fact as a reason to question the general accuracy of their accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, but have assumed that the traditional stories and sayings that were handed on to the evangelists, and from which they constructed their own narratives, can be trusted to provide an authentic picture of Jesus as he actually was.

This assumption is by no means universally accepted, even among professional scholars who are active Christian believers – let alone those who are opposed to Christian faith, who prefer to regard the gospels as imaginative creations dreamed up by Jesus' first followers, and therefore of limited historical value. We can dismiss the claims of those who think that Jesus never existed at all, for there is clear evidence to the contrary from any number of Jewish and Roman sources in addition to the New Testament. But the opinions of others who have studied the New Testament for a lifetime need to be taken more seriously. One of the most radical expressions of this viewpoint was associated with the name of Rudolf Bultmann, who in a book first published in 1934 concluded that virtually nothing can now be known about the life of Jesus. While few others shared that opinion, a significant number of scholars have been doubtful about the possibility of discovering 'the historical Jesus' and there has been a persistent tendency to regard the gospels themselves as reflections of the life of early Christian communities, dressed up to look like accounts of the life of Jesus.

Our knowledge of Jesus is obviously going to be different from our knowledge of Paul, for he can be known directly through the letters that he wrote, and they can be compared and contrasted with the narrative account of his activities in the book of Acts to produce a coherent account of his life and thinking. Jesus, however, never wrote a book and spent his adult life as a wandering teacher in a more or less remote corner of the Roman empire, among people who were not especially interested in literary matters. His hearers spoke Aramaic as their everyday language, though the gospels were all written in Greek, and while Greek would certainly have been familiar to people in Galilee there is no compelling reason to suppose that Jesus normally taught in that language, which means the gospels are, at best, a translation of his words from Aramaic into Greek. One of the consequences of the transmission of Jesus' sayings in Greek is that there are now different versions of the material. The synoptic gospels are so similar that no one doubts they are variants on the same themes, though the differences are too striking to be explained merely as variant translations from Aramaic into Greek. These are the underlying considerations that gave birth to source, form and redaction criticism. No matter which explanation of gospel relationships is adopted, it is obvious that something has happened to the traditions of Jesus' teaching and deeds in the process of their being handed on from one group to another. It is, however, important not to exaggerate the significance of this. For generations, gospel readers who had never heard of the synoptic problem have had little difficulty in dealing with such matters. For all the distinctiveness of the various stories about Jesus, there is clearly an inner coherence in the gospels as a whole and it is relatively easy to identify the key elements of his teaching as the fundamental aspects of it are the same in all four gospels.

Orality and literacy

A significant number of today's scholars would agree that the supposed difference between the original teaching of Jesus and the beliefs of the early church has been overblown, and some are even going so far as to claim that all four of the gospels derived their information from eyewitnesses of the events they describe. But it is still the case that none of them name their authors, and there is no conclusive evidence to show that any of them were written by a direct disciple of Jesus, while Mark and Luke certainly were not. That, combined with the fact that the earliest gospel was written something like thirty to forty years after Jesus' death, can seem a definite weakness to people living in an age when we can send a message round the world in a matter of seconds – though it can plausibly be argued that an extended period of reflection is more likely to offer a reliable perspective on the importance of people and events than snap judgments of the sort that characterize social media.

The spoken word is still the main method of communication for most of the world's people, and the developed world is becoming more aware of the importance of oral history for a proper understanding of the past. Communities in many countries are initiating projects to preserve the unwritten recollections of older people before their memories fail, and in cultures where this type of memorizing has been encouraged and promoted for generations it is amazing how comprehensive a power of recall an older person can have, even for events in the dim and distant past. Oral reminiscences can provide an exceedingly accurate way of recording history, and those whose history has been deliberately disrupted, by events such as the forcible enslavement of Africans in America or the Nazi genocide, have regularly been surprised at how easy it can be to piece together the story of their forebears on the basis of traditional stories handed on in their own families, sometimes (as in the case of African Americans) over centuries. By contrast, the oral period for the New Testament stories about Jesus covers something like fifty years at most, and some of it a lot less. Paul mentions some eyewitness evidence about the resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1–4), and though he wrote that in about AD 55 he says it was information he received when he first became a Christian, not more than a year or two after

Jesus' death.

It is a well-established fact that the rabbis took great pains to ensure that their sayings were actually learned and passed on word for word by their followers. From time to time scholars have proposed that Jesus adopted the same methods, formulating his teaching with a view to his disciples learning it by heart so they could transmit it to their own followers in the same easily memorized form, and that the gospels therefore represent the writing down of accurately transmitted traditions going right back to Jesus himself. There is absolutely no evidence at all to support this suggestion: not only do the gospels themselves highlight how different Jesus was from other religious teachers (Mark 1:22), but there is nothing to suggest that the early Christians ever regarded themselves as the transmitters of tradition, rather than interpreters of the message of Jesus to the needs of their own people. At the same time, we know that Jesus' teaching originated in a culture where the wisdom of an authoritative leader was treated with great respect, and even if the earliest disciples did not learn his sayings by heart they would certainly have had a high regard for them and would not readily have corrupted or altered them. There is also ample evidence for the reliable oral preservation of stories in the wider Hellenistic world. The Life of Apollonius of Tyana has often been viewed as a possible literary model for the gospel genre. Apollonius was a contemporary of Jesus who died towards the end of the first century, though the account of his life was not written down until the beginning of the third century. Its author collected the stories of his life from a number of different sources, and was certainly not an impartial and detached biographer, but there are no serious doubts about the reliability of the main outline of his account. Compared with this and the written accounts about other persons and events in the Roman world, the New Testament gospels were compiled very close in time to the events they describe, and still within the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Differences in parallel accounts can have many different explanations – not just in terms of literary redaction.

Presuppositions

It is also worth reflecting on the assumptions that readers bring to the gospels. What do we expect to find in them? History? Biography? Chronologically structured journals of Jesus' life? Word-for-word precision in reporting what he said? Or something else? Such terminology was alien to the evangelists themselves, who used quite different language to describe their books. The only thing they all consistently claim is that they were writing 'the good news'. But to describe anything as 'good' news is to make a value judgment on it – to commend it, and to imply that those who read it will be glad that they did. In the case of the gospels, there was also a polemical intention: the Romans regarded the accession of a new emperor as 'gospel' (good news, as they saw it), and to insist that the words and deeds of Jesus were the only real gospel was a deliberate challenge to the power of the empire. We have already considered how the evangelists selected their materials so as to fulfil this overall purpose. But this understanding is not merely concerned with the literary style and origin of the gospels: it also has repercussions for an appreciation of the nature of the 'truth' about Jesus as the evangelists present it.

In light of the clearly stated purposes of Luke 1:1–4 and John 20:31 (and implied in the others), there can be no question that these writers had an angle on their stories. They all believed in Jesus. Through his teaching they had discovered new purpose for their own everyday existence, and they wanted to share that with other people. They were convinced that Jesus was not dead, but alive, and was now continuing to work through the presence of the Holy Spirit in his people. The evangelists were certain that the ultimate meaning of the entire cosmos was to be found in Jesus, and if they had not been they would never have bothered to write about him at all. No doubt some readers will be thinking this proves what they have long suspected, for how can people so biased possibly present an objective picture? But the idea that only supposedly unbiased people can ever tell the truth belongs to a way of understanding reality that hardly stands up to critical scrutiny. The philosophical notion developed through the Enlightenment, that merely by the exercise of human reason it is possible to step outside our own experience of life and judge things in some kind of 'objective'

way entirely detached from our own perspectives, is now seen to have been just wishful thinking on the part of self-opinionated white European males who wished to justify their own ideas over against what they regarded as the 'irrational' understandings of people of other times and places. We now know that even the outcome of scientific experiments can be affected by the physical environment in the laboratory, and a moment's thought about how we all receive information in everyday life is sufficient to question not only the existence, but also the value, of a truly 'unbiased' person?

To know anything at all about events we have not witnessed ourselves, we must depend on the accounts of those who did, and those accounts are invariably 'biased'. Moreover, in dealing with things like news reports, we actually expect people to explain to us the significance of what they report. This is what distinguishes news reports and 'proper history' from bare data. Mere records may contain 'facts', but in an abstract and incoherent way, and before they become even remotely interesting they need to be interpreted, and that means asking relevant questions, identifying possible opinions, and presenting some kind of considered value judgment, which will invariably be related to the personal perceptions of those who are processing the information. We take all this for granted in everyday life, even if it is not always easy to distinguish truthful reporting from fake facts or even outright lies. Even people of integrity can experience the same incident and report differently on what they have seen. In describing a car crash, for example, there might be any number of detailed differences in the accounts provided by witnesses and when such cases are tested in court we expect judges to reach a decision by taking account of that. But a judge would be unlikely to conclude that because a crash was described in different ways, it probably never happened, or even that the cars and the roads, the city where the alleged incident took place, did not exist. One who did would not keep the job for long, because these would be absurd conclusions. Yet this is exactly the sort of crazy logic that otherwise intelligent people can apply when talking about the New Testament: the gospels are not identical, their writers were biased and they make value judgments about what they report – so the only safe conclusion must be that these things never happened, and maybe Jesus never existed!

Intellectual imperialism

Such a line of argument can seem to make sense because Western thinkers have often imagined that only people like them are capable of making rational assessments of such matters. There is a tendency to speak so disparagingly of the historians of the Roman world that it is easy to get the impression that the concept of accurate history writing was quite unknown to them. We need hardly be surprised at the emergence of this form of intellectual imperialism towards ancient authors, for it is just another version of the sort of ethnic arrogance that in recent centuries has motivated white Western people to regard themselves as superior to all the rest of the world's people. It is of course true that ancient historians did not have at their disposal all the aids that might be available today, but ancient people were just as conscious of the need for proper research as their modern counterparts. They used different tools and procedures to verify their information, but arguably they were less likely to make things up than many of today's politicians. Latin and Greek historians set themselves high standards for sifting and assessing their information, and developed their own sophisticated procedures for doing so. The principles outlined by an author like Thucydides (460–395 BC) make it quite clear that he operated within guidelines that would not be out of place even today. Luke and John both indicate that they thought they were using the same procedures, and there is every reason to think the others did as well.

A good example of their literary sophistication can be found in the work of Luke, whose gospel was part of a two-volume work which also included the book of Acts, linking the story of Jesus to the story of his early followers. One of the more striking features of Acts is that it tells the story of Paul's dramatic conversion three times, in 9:3–19, 22:6–16, and 26:9–23. All three versions are different. Is this because Luke had no idea what actually happened, or because he was making it all up? If he had been doing that, he would have been more likely to create just one account rather than preserving three slightly different versions. As it is, the most obvious explanation is that Luke adapted the same story at different points in his narrative in order to present varied nuances of the meaning of what he was reporting. If one writer could do that within a single

book, and see no inconsistency about it, there can be no grounds for complaint when different writers are found to have utilized the stories about Jesus in diverse ways to suit the needs of their audience. The early church certainly had no problems with this, as they quite happily preserved all four gospels alongside each other and there was no attempt to create one single harmonized account out of them until later in the second century.

If modern readers find this hard to accept, it is because they are imprisoned by their own presuppositions about how the gospels should have been written. The evangelists were not interested in preserving the words of Jesus as souvenirs from the past: they were not primarily annalists, but evangelists and pastors. They regarded Jesus' teaching as a living message with the power to bring new light into the lives of those who read and reflected on it. Even something as important as the Lord's Prayer was used in different forms when Christians met for worship – and so Matthew's version (6:9–13) was not quite identical with Luke's (11:2–4), and continued use changed it a bit more by adding the benediction with which all modern versions now conclude. To question the reliability of the gospel accounts on the basis of their diversity is to impose unfair standards of logical consistency that would never be applied to any other literature.

Not unrelated to this is a more general philosophical scepticism towards any document, whether ancient or modern, that challenges us to step outside our own experience of life. Much study of the Bible operates with a mechanistic worldview, regarding the universe as a closed system operating within 'laws of nature' that are entirely predictable and never deviate. By definition, therefore, the unpredictable cannot happen, and on this view it is inevitable that the gospels should be regarded as something other than history because they offer accounts of some unusual happenings that violate the 'laws of nature' as understood by Newtonian science. Science, of course, no longer operates on that paradigm, and the work of more recent theorists has led to the emergence of a far more flexible understanding of what may be possible within the physical universe. Philosophers and theologians frequently have a lot to say about the emergence of so-called post-modernity, but on the whole they have yet to accept its implications, not least because it would put their own work in a wider context, as

just one possible way among many others of understanding the nature of reality. This is not the place for an extensive engagement with this narrow-minded philosophical stance, except to observe that it is part of the legacy of imperialism and colonialism, which has already been superseded by cutting-edge science and which will need to be jettisoned by theologians if they are to be capable of engaging creatively with the wider experience of the human race. To insist that human knowledge should be constrained by what we now think we know is a head-in-the-sand attitude that can all too easily engender paternalistic attitudes to non-western ethnic groups whose traditional worldviews on topics such as healing and divine communications are generally more broadly based and open-ended.

History and culture

In addition to such general considerations that will apply to any historical investigation, there are several specific matters relevant to study of the gospels.

Inscriptions and artefacts

The gospel stories show direct and specific knowledge of life in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and give a generally authentic image of life in that culture, even though some of their writers were certainly not at home in Palestine, and one (Luke) was not a Jew at all. They were all writing after the events they describe, some of them at a time when the face of the country had been irreversibly changed by the devastation of a major war between Romans and guerrilla fighters (AD 66–70), and they compiled their books in places geographically far removed from the scene of Jesus' ministry. They must have been relying on information that went back much further in time and which was based on actual knowledge of the places and people mentioned, for archaeological finds have regularly shown the gospel writers to have been correct even in cases where they were once thought to be mistaken.

Language

Behind the teachings of Jesus (recorded in the gospels in Greek) it is possible to trace clear echoes of Aramaic, the language of rural Palestine. Transliterations of Aramaic expressions are occasionally incorporated, such as the words from the cross (Matthew 27:46), or the call to Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:41), or the name of 'the Pavement' in Jerusalem (John 19:13). At other points, notably in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), when sayings of Jesus are translated back into Aramaic they display literary features that would only have made sense in that language. Much of Jesus' teaching is preserved in the form of Aramaic poetry, recognizable even in an English translation, which at times displays features such as alliteration and assonance that could have had meaning only in Aramaic. Such facts do not of course prove that Jesus spoke these words. Strictly speaking, the most they can show is that they go back to a form in which they were preserved by Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Christians. But for that reason they favour the authenticity of the gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching, for they link them with a time shortly after the events of his life, death, and resurrection, when many eyewitnesses must still have been alive to challenge any accounts which did not present an authentic image of him, and may well have been the source for much of this information.

Distinctiveness

Another striking fact is that the gospels are different in every way from the rest of the New Testament. They are of course different in literary genre, for much of the rest consists of letters written by various Christian leaders to their friends. But their fundamental concerns are also very different from what is known of the life and circumstances of the early Gentile churches. It is wrong to imagine that, because the gospels were written to serve the needs of the churches, they are little more than a mirror reflecting the life of those early communities, for the rest of the New Testament shows that the church had many needs that are not even remotely addressed in the gospels. There is, for example, no real teaching on the nature of the church itself, something that is so obvious a gap that we found it necessary to ask in chapter 5 whether Jesus was interested in founding a church at all. Even baptism, which from the start was the rite of initiation into the Christian community, is only mentioned by Jesus in one isolated instance (Matthew 28:19). Jesus himself did not baptize, nor did he make baptism a central part of his teaching, yet this was a matter of great importance to the early church, and if they did indeed make a regular practice of manufacturing 'sayings of Jesus' to meet their needs, it is difficult to understand why they would not have chosen to do so on such a significant topic. There is a similar absence of specific guidance on other crucial subjects. Very soon after Jesus' death there was a wide-ranging controversy over the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian community. This was a major practical issue, for the two groups needed to get along with each other in the church, and their habits were often quite different. But it was also a theological question, for if Jesus was the Messiah then how did being one of his followers relate to those who were part of the people of God in the faith tradition to which the Hebrew scriptures bore witness? Church leaders wrestled with that question for a long time, and if only Jesus had said something on it much heart-searching and acrimony could no doubt have been avoided. There must have been great pressure for somebody to invent a 'saying of Jesus' that would provide the definitive answer, and yet there is no sign at all of that happening.

In other respects also the gospels preserve their own distinctive emphasis when

compared with the rest of the New Testament. Whereas the term ‘Son of Man’ is the most widely used name for Jesus in the gospels, it hardly appears anywhere else, and the same is true of ‘the kingdom of God’, which was the heart of Jesus’ teaching in the synoptics but virtually never features in the rest of the New Testament. The fact is that if we were to try to reconstruct the church’s life situation from the gospels, we would never produce the picture that we know to be true from the New Testament letters, for there are so many features of the gospel stories about Jesus that are quite different from the life and concerns of the early church.

At the very least, then, the burden of proof must be with those who wish to question the accuracy of the gospel narratives rather than with those who wish to assume that the gospels preserve a generally authentic picture of Jesus as he actually was. That is not to say that they contain something akin to a photographic record of his life, but then they never claimed to do so. Nor does it entail the belief that the gospels contain an exact word-for-word account of all Jesus’ teaching – but none of them claim that either. The evangelists were not mere recorders of tradition, but were interpreters of the facts handed on to them. Their books are more like portraits than photographs, for they present Jesus through the eyes of those who knew his teaching and admired his example. Far from invalidating their stories, this very fact itself makes what they have written more true to life, and more accessible to their readers because it enables these narratives to speak in the common language of humanity, addressing the issues that have concerned people searching for the meaning of life at all times and in all places. It is this quality that has ensured the adaptability of the gospels to many different cultures, and that will guarantee that future generations continue to be fascinated by the person who is their central character.

Searching for the real Jesus

In the early years of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer produced a remarkable account of the scholarly search for Jesus over the previous century, entitled The Quest of the Historical Jesus. The story of this quest, and its successive stages, not only reflects the intellectual history of the last 200 years or more, but also provides insights into the nature of New Testament scholarship that help to explain many of the issues that are still the topic of intense scrutiny even today.

The Quest begins

The search for a ‘historical Jesus’ distinct from the Jesus of Christian faith had its origins in the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Up to this point the Bible had traditionally been regarded as the supernatural gift of God and therefore beyond rational enquiry. Likewise Jesus had been regarded as the Son of God, and therefore by definition he could not be understood as a human figure, because that was not who he was. But as the classics of ancient Greece and Rome were subjected to critical reflection, it was natural to wonder what might happen if the gospels were to be looked at in the same way as Plato or Tacitus, or indeed the more recent stories of medieval saints. What would Jesus look like when viewed as just one historical figure among many?

The first person to give an answer to that question was Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), though his views were not published until after his death by his friend Gotthold Lessing. Reimarus proposed that the real Jesus was quite different from the one portrayed in the gospels, and whereas Jesus had been a simple Jewish teacher, the disciples wrote the gospels to promote their own new religion – a faith that they themselves had founded on a lie by stealing Jesus’ body and then claiming he was still alive. This view, especially the element of conscious deception by the disciples, was by no means universally accepted, but the very fact that it could be expressed at all gave confidence to others to continue asking purely historical questions about Jesus. By 1836, David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) had published his monumental Life of Jesus, in which he dismissed the supernatural elements of the gospels as incredible and argued that their narratives were best understood as mythological stories embodying the beliefs of the early Christians rather than historical information about Jesus’ life. If Jesus was not as the gospels depicted him, then what was he like? The following decades saw the publication of many books attempting to answer that question. Most of the ‘lives of Jesus’ to appear in this period depicted him as a reformer and ethical teacher, though there were some dissenters, most notably Johannes Weiss who believed Jesus to have been an apocalyptic prophet expecting the end of the world, and Alfred Edersheim who

argued that the gospels present a reliable picture of Jesus as he truly was. Schweitzer's book summarized the course of this research but while he documented the achievements of these scholars he also questioned the credibility of their conclusions by arguing that the various portraits of Jesus that they offered owed more to the optimistic liberalism of these scholars than to anything that Jesus might be imagined to have been. Insofar as Schweitzer had a view on the matter, he agreed with Weiss that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, who had obviously been mistaken, and that most of those who wrote so confidently about the 'historical Jesus' were actually describing themselves. But he further argued that such a quest was not possible anyway, not only because of the lack of objectivity of those scholars who were engaged in it, but also because he believed that the gospels simply do not contain enough biographical information on which to base any kind of solid judgment. There may not be any accessible 'objective' picture of Jesus – but neither was there such a thing as an 'objective historian'.

The Quest is suspended

Following Schweitzer's exhaustive analysis, it no longer seemed worthwhile to continue searching for that elusive picture of the historical Jesus. Schweitzer's work was not the only reason for this suspension of the Quest, however. At the same time as some were confidently writing their lives of Jesus, others were more painstakingly investigating the nature of the gospels as literature. In 1863, the fundamental principles of the two-document hypothesis of synoptic origins were first expounded by H. J. Holtzmann, and he and others began the task of trying to ascertain the relative historical value of the various early accounts of Jesus' life and teaching that this theory had identified. During this period, Mark was reinstated as a source of unexpected value while John was dismissed as a relatively worthless source of hard information about Jesus, and Q was also identified as a source of independent (and therefore, by implication, reliable) information about Jesus. These findings had in turn encouraged those who were trying to describe the historical Jesus to think that they now had a more or less objective set of criteria with which to identify the real Jesus and separate him out from the church's fantasies about him: anything found in Mark and Q was likely to be factual, while the rest of the gospel traditions were more open to question. William Wrede, however, put an end to that idea with his 1901 book on the messianic secret, in which he argued that even Mark was inextricably bound up with the early church's efforts to project its own faith in Jesus as Messiah back into the traditions of Jesus' own lifetime. With one of its major sources of the history of Jesus thus dismissed, the Quest could not go on.

For the next forty years, roughly up to the end of World War II, the dominant opinion was that it was impossible to disentangle the Jesus of the church's faith (the gospels) from the historical Jesus of Nazareth. During this period, the findings of form criticism seemed to make historical reconstruction even more problematic, for if the gospels were basically constructed out of otherwise unrelated units of tradition, with the framework within which the units were placed being the creation of the evangelists, that meant that even Mark did not provide any sort of reliable chronological or geographical – let alone biographical – context within which to imagine what the historical Jesus might

actually have been like. Moreover, at the same time Rudolf Bultmann was arguing that the Quest was methodologically impossible, not only because of the difficulty of breaking through the theological images overlaid by the evangelists but also because it was a pointless exercise since Christianity was not based on faith in Jesus of Nazareth but in the risen and ascended Christ of early Christian devotion. Incorporating an understanding of Christianity derived from the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), he argued that it really made no difference at all who the historical Jesus might have been, for what really mattered was not what Jesus of Nazareth might have said or done during his lifetime, but what God did through the cross and resurrection.

The Quest resumes

The Quest was subsequently resumed by a group of Bultmann's own students, most notably Ernst Käsemann (1906–98) in his inaugural lecture as professor at Göttingen in 1953. Using the tools of form criticism, and the emerging discipline of redaction criticism, the gospels would now be examined to see if there might be some irreducible minimum of reliable tradition about Jesus that could have given rise to the more extensively developed beliefs about him that were held by the early church. An underlying supposition here was that the beliefs of the church could hardly have arisen in a vacuum, from nowhere, so there must have been aspects of the teaching of the historical Jesus that, while not as sophisticated as the later beliefs of the church, could have been the starting point for subsequent reflection. In this context a whole range of criteria were adopted whereby authentic Jesus tradition might be distinguished from later accretions. Foremost among these was the so-called criterion of dissimilarity, or distinctiveness: the assumption that teaching could be traced back to Jesus only if it could not have derived from either the beliefs of the early church or from Judaism.

These criteria are discussed below, but it has to be said that the effort to distance Jesus from Judaism had not always been motivated by a concern for detached objectivity, and it is not a coincidence that the idea that the most authentic Jesus was not Jewish first emerged at a time when Europe – Germany in particular – was in the grip of an anti-Semitic ideology inspired by the Nazis. Another element that shaped this resumed Quest for the Historical Jesus was also the strongly held conviction that anything in the New Testament that seemed to reflect the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church was a secondary corruption of the pure apostolic faith, which in radical Lutheran terms was represented by Paul. These aspects of scholarly enquiry are discussed in more detail in chapters 15 and 20 of this book, but they are mentioned here because this obvious ideological agenda was a key reason for the replacement of this particular phase of the Quest for the Historical Jesus by a rather different emphasis, as theologians across the world began to come to terms with what the Nazis had done.

The Third Quest

This period, which began in the 1970s, is generally referred to as the Third Quest to distinguish it from the first one (19th century) and the second, or new one just mentioned. Unlike its predecessors, this Quest is rooted not in Germany but in the English-speaking world, especially in the USA. It is characterized by three main concerns.

Interdisciplinary

While every generation imagines its methods to be not only the latest word, but also the final word, on any given subject, it is certainly the case that today's scholars have at their fingertips a greater variety of methodologies and approaches than has been the case for any previous generation. The use of sociological and anthropological insights into the first-century world in which Jesus lived and the gospels were written has added significant new dimensions to the quest for the historical Jesus. By trying to set Jesus in the context of his day, and examining what is known of his life to see to what extent the narratives reflect an authentic portrayal of what was going on in Palestinian society, it has been possible to compare Jesus with itinerant charismatic preachers within Judaism, and to establish a plausible social context within which he operated, and which also influenced the style of his followers in the early church. Many of these insights are incorporated into the understanding of the New Testament in this book.

Jesus and Judaism

Jesus has been reclaimed for Judaism, and in a complete reversal of the approach of the Second Quest, a major criterion of authenticity came to be the extent to

which his lifestyle and teaching would have made sense within a Jewish context, rather than (as before) the extent to which he differed from his Jewish compatriots. Given the New Testament's extensive use of imagery from the Hebrew scriptures to articulate the significance of the life and teaching of Jesus, it may seem odd that such a comparison should be noteworthy, for it would seem obvious to test the gospel presentations of Jesus against this background. But such has been the desire of past generations of Christian scholars to distance Jesus from Judaism that this is indeed a new departure – and one which, in the process, is shedding much new light on previously neglected aspects of the gospel narratives.

Other gospels

The Third Quest is also characterized by a recognition that early Christianity was itself a diverse movement, and that in order to make the picture of the historical Jesus as comprehensive as possible, all the gospel-type traditions that can be identified should be used in the effort. The most high-profile example of this approach is represented by the Jesus Seminar established by Robert Funk in 1985, which took the view that non-canonical documents such as the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas represent an early, independent perspective on Jesus' teaching, and are therefore of equal value to the synoptics and John. Q has often been included in this, as evidence for the existence of a different way of understanding Jesus within mainstream Christianity, with apparently no need for the inclusion of his death and resurrection. On this basis, it has been proposed that the historical Jesus was a 'wisdom' teacher, a kind of Jewish Cynic influenced by similar trends within Hellenistic culture, and that this explains his gradual marginalization from Judaism. However, this is based on a particular understanding of the way in which Q came to be written, and others find it more plausible to see Jesus as an apocalyptic teacher in a more traditional Jewish context.

This phase in 'historical Jesus' research still continues, though following the demise of the Jesus Seminar as a result of the death of its founder Robert Funk in

2005 it is now less clearly focused than the previous stages. On the one hand, some maintain a generally sceptical approach to the gospel traditions, while others are making more positive evaluations of the historical worth of the gospels, especially in relation to their presentation of Jewish spirituality, and the involvement of Jewish scholars in this enterprise has enhanced the Quest in this way. Yet others argue that the entire premise behind the Quest is seriously flawed, and it is a waste of time to try and identify a Jesus who was an unremarkable historical figure independently of the Jesus whose words and deeds evoked faith and commitment. Since the gospels are in effect the story of the impact that he made on those who met him, their experiences of faith must be taken into account as an intrinsic component of the historical evidence. Those who take this approach often question the possibility of any one avenue of enquiry ever being able to be 'objective' in the usual sense of that word. The very act of being sufficiently interested to study Jesus implies a pre-existing supposition about his importance, whether positively or negatively – and a perspective of faith is neither better nor worse, historically speaking, than one of no faith. The outcome of the Quest, on this understanding, reveals more of the preferences of particular scholars than it does about Jesus.

Identifying the words of Jesus

In discussing the Quest for the Historical Jesus, we have already noted that a growing number of scholars are now questioning that entire approach to the gospel narratives. If the approach is mistaken, then it follows that its methods must also be open to serious question. This is especially the case with regard to the various criteria that have been applied in the effort to distinguish what is historically primary, reflecting Jesus as he actually was, and what is secondary comment and explanation. These criteria had a significant impact on New Testament studies throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and continue to influence some elements of contemporary scholarship.

Dissimilarity (distinctiveness)

This criterion can be traced back to Bultmann's book The History of the Synoptic Tradition, and is based on the assumption that anything in Jesus' teaching that is paralleled in either Judaism or the early church must be of doubtful authenticity for it could have come into the gospels from either of those two sources rather than from an authentic reminiscence of Jesus. The only points at which we may be sure that we are in direct contact with Jesus himself are those where his teaching is totally unique. Typical examples might be Jesus' use of the word Abba in addressing God, or his characteristic way of beginning important statements with the word Amen, which as far as we know were devices used neither by the rabbis nor by the early church. Information retrieved by this means is often said to represent an irreducible minimum of historical knowledge about Jesus, though even that modest claim is open to question as the successful application of the criterion requires that our present knowledge of both Judaism and the early church is more or less complete. The fact is, however, that relatively little is known about Judaism at the time of Jesus, and the New Testament itself is actually one of the few contemporary accounts of Jewish practice in the early first century. New information is constantly being discovered and assessed, and with it new parallels to the teaching of Jesus are certain to emerge. As a method, therefore, the criterion of distinctiveness was a counsel of despair, and the logical outcome of its application was, as Bultmann concluded, that nothing certain could be known about Jesus.

Even within its own frame of reference, there are significant aspects of the gospels where this criterion was always going to lead to a dead end. Applying it to Jesus' teaching on eschatology, for example, would inevitably lead to the conclusion that he never spoke in that way since much of his language can also be found in Jewish and early Christian sources. Even the distinctive teaching of the Sermon on the Mount would have to be jettisoned for the same reasons, for Paul shows a clear knowledge of that in Romans 12–14, as also does the epistle of James. There was always a basic flaw in this approach: it must inevitably lead, both theoretically and practically, to the claim that nothing useful can be known about Jesus from the gospels.

Coherence

Those who still use these criteria are not unaware of the problems involved with the principle of dissimilarity, which is why it is never used alone but often in conjunction with the criterion of coherence. This is based on the assumption that any material in the gospels that is compatible with the teaching which passes the dissimilarity test can also be counted as a genuine statement of what Jesus said and did. On the face of it, this further criterion seems promising, but it is dependent on a successful application of the first one, so if that leads to no secure results then this second test is also useless. In any case, who decides what is ‘coherent’ and what is not? What seems coherent to us would not necessarily have seemed so to the early church.

Multiple attestation

This one goes back to the earliest stages of the Quest for the historical Jesus and has been widely used, not only by scholars who adopted a form-critical methodology. On this criterion, teaching mentioned in the gospels is genuinely from Jesus if it is found in more than one gospel source. This is a useful test as far as it goes, for if Mark and Q give a similar impression of the content of Jesus' teaching then it is reasonable to believe that it is an authentic impression. But this criterion also faces a number of difficulties, though they are not as great as the problems involved with the other two:

It is not possible by this means to say anything about specific statements attributed to Jesus, for there are very few stories or sayings that are contained in more than one of the gospel sources. Indeed this reality is foundational for the whole source-critical approach to the gospels. If the same teaching was found everywhere, there would have been no need for any explanation of the relationships between the various gospels. The most this method can define is the general tone of Jesus' teaching, rather than a detailed account of it.

Its logical application would require us to dismiss as inauthentic those parts of Jesus' teaching that are found in only one gospel source. Yet this is the case with some of the most characteristic parts of Jesus' teaching. Using this test, stories such as the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) or the lost son (Luke 15:11–32) would be excluded altogether from an account of Jesus' life and teaching because they are found only in Luke.

To be applied convincingly, this criterion needs to assume the existence of a rigid literary distinction between the various gospel sources, such as Streeter proposed in his classic presentation of the four-document hypothesis. But more recent study has shown that the question of the relationships between the gospels

and their sources is more complex than that, and the traditions underlying the gospels in their present form must have been both more diverse and more fluid.

A basic flaw?

The problems involved in using these criteria to identify the authentic words of Jesus within the gospels highlight a more fundamental flaw in the method. For they all begin from the notion that the gospels mostly contain the beliefs of the early church and only a very little, if anything at all, that comes directly from Jesus himself. A model for this is said to be found in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, where the Christian prophet John delivers messages from the heavenly Christ to seven churches in Asia Minor. Paul also mentions prophets working in the church (1 Corinthians 12:27–31), and it is proposed that their main function was to issue ‘sayings of Jesus’ to meet some specific need in the church’s life. Though this argument is often accepted without question, a number of objections can be made against it.

It is based on very precarious evidence. Though it is often confidently stated that the role of the Christian prophet was to invent sayings of Jesus, there is in fact very little evidence to show what the prophets did in the early church. The messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation are irrelevant, for a clear distinction is made there between the experience and words of the writer of the book and what is reported as a message from the risen Christ. The only episode where prophets are shown at work is in Acts 13:1–3, where they give instructions regarding the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas. Even these instructions, however, are not said to have been given in the name of Jesus, but with the authority of the Holy Spirit. This kind of evidence is so slight that it can provide only the vaguest indication of the characteristic activity of these prophets.

The assumption that prophets could freely invent ‘sayings of Jesus’ also assumes that the first Christians made no clear distinction between Jesus’ teaching and their own. Again, there is no hard evidence for this. Paradoxically, such evidence as there is comes from the writings of Paul, who is the New Testament writer most often accused of showing a disregard for the teachings of Jesus, and who

also claimed more than once to have a greater measure of charismatic endowments than most of his contemporaries (1 Corinthians 14:18–19; 2 Corinthians 12:1–10). These two facts alone would make him an ideal candidate to have been a creator of ‘sayings of Jesus’, and it might be expected that his letters would be full of such sayings, delivered by himself under the influence of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of giving advice to his readers. In fact, the opposite is true, and in 1 Corinthians 7, for example, he goes out of his way to distinguish between his own opinions and the teaching of Jesus.

In the end, this notion is a self-justifying – and self-defeating – proposition. The only ‘evidence’ that prophets regularly formulated such sayings is the notion that the gospel traditions had their origin in the early church and not in the ministry of Jesus: a hypothetical life-setting has been imagined for the gospels, which is then used to interpret their meaning. It is not surprising that on this basis the gospels can be demonstrated to be products of the pious imagination of the early church for, like the nineteenth-century ‘lives of Jesus’ which portrayed him in the image of their authors, the evidence has been put into the gospels rather than emerging as the end-product of the investigation.

It is also often argued that the fact that the gospel writers aimed to edify their readers automatically means that they should be suspect as historical sources. This is another nostrum that is often asserted but seldom supported. There is no reason at all for a story or piece of teaching that conveys a practical or theological message of necessity to be historically false. That would be absurd. It is simply not a valid historical argument to propose that because the gospels and their contents were relevant to life in the middle of the first century, they can have had no historical grounding in the times of Jesus himself.

Prophets in the early church

If the prophets of the early church were not involved in either the creation or preservation of the gospel traditions, who then were they? They were obviously important, as they are regularly mentioned immediately after the apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28–29; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 4:11), while the tasks of evangelist, pastor, and teacher to which later Christians have given a high priority are always placed after the prophets in order of importance (1 Corinthians 12:28–29; Ephesians 4:11; Acts 13:1; Romans 12:6–8). Furthermore, when Paul came to advise Christians at Corinth about the use of spiritual gifts within their church, he advised them to desire all the gifts that had appeared among them, but especially ‘prophecy’ (1 Corinthians 14:1–5; 12:4–11). So what was this prophecy, which is mentioned not only in 1 Corinthians but also throughout the book of Acts?

These prophets seem to have been people with a particularly close access to God’s will that enabled them not only to forecast certain specific events in the future (as Agabus did, Acts 11:28; 21:10–11; see also Revelation 22:6) but also to deliver other authoritative guidance for situations that arose within the life of the churches. In Acts 13:1–4, the prophets of the church at Antioch, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gave directions that Paul and Barnabas should be ‘set apart… for the work to which I have called them’ (NRSV), while the four daughters of Philip the evangelist regularly operated as prophets in the church at Caesarea (Acts 21:8–9). The deliverance of prophecy was also involved in the appointment of Timothy (1 Timothy 1:18; 4:14), while at other times prophets could be found rebuking Christians who were lazy or encouraging those whose faith was under attack (see for example 1 Corinthians 14:3; Acts 15:32). In addition to such practical activities within the Christian community, however, prophets also had an important theological task. 1 Corinthians 13:2 equates being a prophet with understanding ‘all mysteries and all knowledge’ (NRSV), while Ephesians 3:5–6 indicates that the prophets had a particular part to play in explaining how Gentiles could be incorporated within the community of God’s people that had its beginnings in Old Testament times. But they were not

infallible, and prophets could occasionally get things wrong. Paul laid considerable emphasis on the need for prophetic utterances to be scrutinized by the further gift of ‘discernment’ whereby the true and the false might be distinguished (1 Corinthians 12:10). Nevertheless, the prophets were highly regarded in the churches of the New Testament period, as inspired men and women who enjoyed particular insights into the Christian message, and through whom the divine will was made known to the church.

PART 4

GOOD NEWS GOES GLOBAL

CHAPTER 12

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

After the resurrection of Jesus, his followers faced some hard choices. The previous two or three years had been the most exciting time of their lives. They had been captivated by his teaching, and watched with growing expectancy as Jesus' actions made it plain that God's kingdom had really and truly arrived. Then came the crucifixion, and the apparent failure of all their ambitions. Even the resurrection left them afraid and disillusioned, and when they realized that Jesus would no longer be physically present with them they must have been under intense pressure simply to forget him, to regard those three years as a temporary interlude and return home to pick up the threads of their working lives. By doing that, they would still be able to share their memories of him, and perhaps even try to put some of his teaching into practice in the local synagogues of rural Palestine – but their lives would no longer be dominated by him in the way they had been before. Yet the more they thought about it, the more they knew how impossible such a reaction would be. Jesus had demanded their radical and wholehearted obedience when they first met him, and his final message to them was just as challenging and uncompromising: 'Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples… you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth…' (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8).

Back to Jesus

Jesus had never really been an establishment figure. He might have been addressed as ‘rabbi’ or ‘teacher’ (Luke 10:25; 18:18; 19:39), but right from the beginning they all knew that he was different and that his message was distinctive. In his very first report of Jesus’ public teaching, Mark comments that those who heard him ‘were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes’ (1:22, NRSV). That does not mean his teaching was completely new and unique, and almost everything in Jesus’ teaching had been said before him by the Jewish rabbis. Since he and they were setting out to explain the significance of the Hebrew scriptures for their own generation, it is hardly surprising that they discussed the same issues and on occasion reached similar conclusions. But what was so different about Jesus – and what was to set his followers radically apart from Judaism – was the frame of reference in which he set his teaching. For on two crucial matters Jesus adopted a fundamentally different stance from other religious teachers of his day.

Law and gospel

The Law, or Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), was central to Judaism and observing all its details was the way that faithful believers demonstrated their devotion to God and commitment to the covenant with Israel. It is difficult for a non-Jew today to understand the almost mystical significance of the Law for a faithful believer in the time of Jesus, and no doubt that is part of the reason why influential biblical scholars have found it easy to misrepresent Jewish spirituality as a harsh and unforgiving legalistic system driven by a demand for blind obedience. Keeping the Law and its precepts had always been a central plank of Judaism, and it would have been unthinkable that anyone might please God without also observing the many detailed requirements of the Torah.

There had always been more than one way of understanding what might be entailed in keeping the Law. Seven hundred years before the time of Jesus, the prophet Amos had condemned his contemporaries for their eagerness to follow the tiniest details of ritual and ceremonial regulations while ignoring the ethical requirements that were also laid down in the Torah (Amos 5:21–24). Jesus noted the same tendency in his day, and his strongly worded condemnation of the Pharisees was not much different from Amos's complaints: 'You hypocrites! You give to God one tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty' (Matthew 23:23). Such behaviour was presumably not uncommon, for when Jesus was asked why his disciples did not keep every detailed requirement of the Law he reminded his questioners of their own inconsistency in avoiding moral obligations to their parents by using a legal loophole that would allow them to use their wealth for more 'religious' purposes (Mark 7:1–13). The adoption of double standards is of course by no means an exclusively Jewish problem, and to label it as such is to import an ethnic dimension into Jesus' teaching that was not intended. Jesus never actually questioned the validity of the Law, nor did he deny that it had been given by God, though he did suggest that with his own coming it was no longer relevant (Luke 16:16). More than that, in a series of remarkable statements he contrasted

his own teaching with that of the Torah and elevated his own authority to a higher status than that of Moses, the traditional Hebrew law-giver: ‘You have heard that people were told in the past [by Moses] but now I tell you…’ (Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–47). It is also significant that according to Mark’s account of his trial by the religious authorities, Jesus was first charged with blasphemy against the temple (Mark 14:57–59). The charge failed, but from the authorities’ viewpoint it was not totally without foundation, as can be seen from his statement in Matthew 12:6, ‘I tell you that there is something here greater than the Temple.’

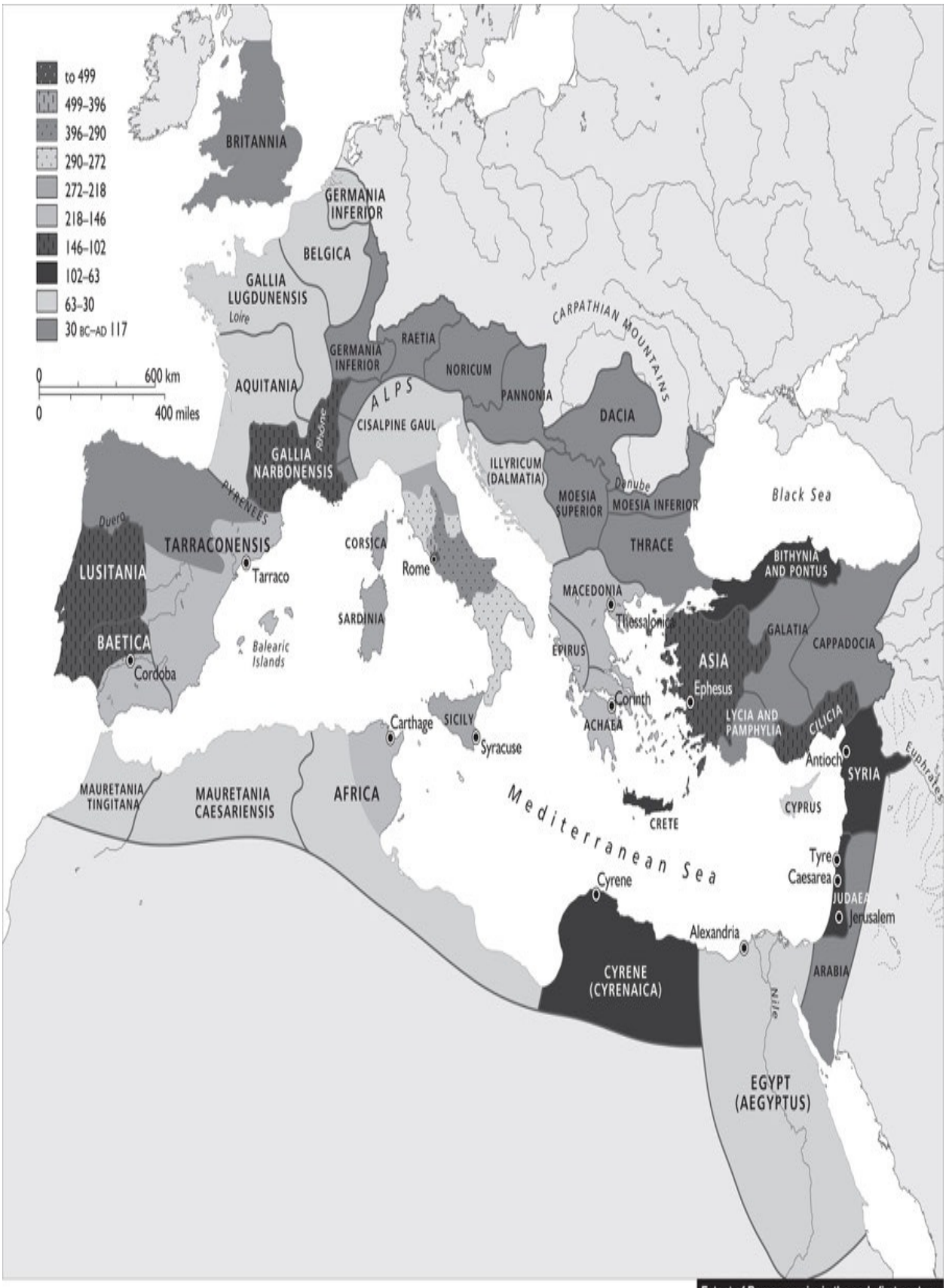
It is therefore not surprising that, though Jesus might seem to be a harmless eccentric, he was soon outlawed by the religious establishment. This radical teaching about the Law and the temple struck at the very foundations of their most firmly held convictions. Other rabbis had asked awkward questions before, but generally in the context of polite debate about points of interpretation. If Jesus had been content to do the same the system may have assimilated him more easily. It was not totally inflexible, and had survived many changes before and would undergo many others after the time of Jesus. But Jesus was above all an activist, and detached scholarly argument was not his style. The way he behaved was, if anything, even more scandalous than his teaching. Mark 2:23–28 tells how he and his disciples picked grain as they walked through the fields, an action that was forbidden because it was regarded as harvesting by the legal experts of the day, and therefore an infringement of the law about not working on the sabbath. Jesus’ reply to their criticism of this behaviour was to justify his disregard of the Law with the declaration that ‘the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath’ (verse 27). On another occasion he was asked why his disciples ignored the conventions about ritual washing before eating a meal and he dismissed that criticism by appeal to a higher principle: ‘whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile… it is what comes out of a person that defiles… it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come, leading people to do immoral things, to rob, kill, commit adultery, be greedy…’ (Mark 7:18–22, author’s translation). Not only did Jesus challenge the precepts of the Law in this way, but he also insisted on taking his message to people who were regarded as unworthy. Lepers, prostitutes, tax gatherers (Roman collaborators), and others feature regularly and prominently in the gospels, while Jesus himself was described as ‘a glutton and a wine drinker, a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts’ (Matthew 11:19) – a charge that he

never denied. Instead of making his friends among the conventionally religious Jesus chose those who were despised for their inability to keep the Law. He even made a virtue out of it, reminding his questioners on one occasion that ‘I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts’ (Mark 2:17).

Several stories explain why Jesus felt like that, but perhaps none sums up his attitude more succinctly than the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to pray in the temple at the same time. The Pharisee prided himself on his moral and religious attainments, and told God so. The tax collector, on the other hand, was so conscious of his own unworthiness to speak to God at all that he could only cry out, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’ (NRSV). However, Jesus said, ‘the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home’ because he recognized his own sinfulness and came to God with no spiritual pretensions (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisees were emphasizing the importance of showing commitment to the covenant by faithful observance of the Law, whereas Jesus believed it was possible to keep all that was in the Law – and more besides – and still not please God. Whereas the religious establishment was concerned with actions that could be assessed and regulated by rules, Jesus was much more concerned with what a person is than with what he or she does. Paradoxically, perhaps, he did not go on to dismiss behaviour as unimportant, but he emphasized that how people behave reveals their inner nature, and for him the secret of goodness was therefore to be found not in obedience to rules but in the spontaneous activities of a transformed character (Matthew 7:18).

Religion and race

The moral precepts of the Hebrew scriptures were admired throughout the Roman empire, and many Romans and Greeks aspired to live by the principles enshrined in the Ten Commandments and other parts of the Torah. But admiring the Law was not quite the same thing as pleasing God, and before they could be fully incorporated into the people of God, Judaism required Gentiles to be circumcised and accept the various detailed regulations of the Law. In effect, Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be accepted by God: there was no salvation outside the Jewish nation. This stringent requirement of converts did not stop the Pharisees and others from engaging in missionary activity among non-Jews, and Jesus himself commended them for their enthusiasm (Matthew 23:15). But he evidently did not approve of their insistence that in order to please God such people should accept all the detailed regulations of the Torah.



Extent of Roman empire in the early first century.

The precise extent of Jesus' own involvement in a mission to those Gentiles is somewhat unclear. He certainly made no intentional effort to connect with them, though all four gospels show him accepting and respecting the faith of such people whenever he met them. He was not unwilling to assist even a Roman officer, remarking in the process that 'I have never found anyone in Israel with faith like this' (Matthew 8:5–13). A number of incidents depict his acceptance of various non-Jewish groups within Palestinian society (Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–30), while one of his best-known parables praised the virtues of a Samaritan, the one group that was despised perhaps more than any other by religious Jews (Luke 10:25–37). In the light of this, some readers of the gospels have found a contradiction in Jesus' instruction to his disciples in Matthew 10:5–6, 'Do not go to any Gentile territory or any Samaritan towns. Instead, you are to go to those lost sheep, the people of Israel.' But this advice was given in respect of a limited mission tour which the disciples were to undertake for a short period during Jesus lifetime, and Matthew himself certainly did not regard it as more widely applicable for he is the only evangelist who records the great commission of Jesus, exhorting disciples to 'Go… to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples…' (28:19). Other passages such as Matthew 8:10–12 and 21:43 make the same point, as do many passages in Luke. The best way to understand the advice of Matthew 10:5 is to set it alongside another commission given after the resurrection: '… you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). It was natural that the first followers of Jesus should initially take their message to the Jewish community for they were themselves Palestinian Jews, and Paul later adopted the same strategy in cities far removed from Palestine and regularly gave the Jewish community first opportunity to respond to his message before he took it to Gentiles. In Romans 11:13–24 he insisted that there was a theological basis for this priority, related to the ancient history of Israel as the recipients of the Law and the people of God's covenant.

The church is born

Meeting behind closed doors in Jerusalem in the weeks after Jesus' resurrection, it was easier for the disciples to talk about changing the world than to go out and do it – until something happened that not only altered their thinking but gave them a courage and boldness to share their faith that was to send shockwaves throughout the Roman world. Just fifty days after the crucifixion Peter found himself standing before a large crowd in the streets of Jerusalem, fearlessly declaring that God's kingdom had arrived and that Jesus was its leader and Messiah. At the time Jerusalem was full of pilgrims who had come from all parts of the empire for the Festival of Pentecost, and as Peter spoke they not only understood his message but when he invited them to become disciples of Jesus themselves, 3,000 accepted his challenge and declared their willingness to live according to the values and standards of God's kingdom (Acts 2:14–42).

A promise fulfilled

What had produced such a transformation in the lives of Jesus' followers? As Peter stood up to address the crowd he reminded them of an Old Testament passage that described the coming new age as a time when the divine Spirit would work in an unprecedented way in the lives of men and women. As the Hebrew prophets had looked to the future, some of them realized that the human predicament would only be resolved with the establishment of a new relationship between God and people in which God's generosity would overflow in such a way that everyone could receive the moral power to be what they were intended to be (Jeremiah 31:31–34). In Joel 2:28–32, this new power for living had been associated with the gift of God's Spirit, and Peter claimed that this was now coming true in his own experience and that of the other disciples: through Jesus' death and resurrection, ordinary people could enjoy a new level of personal relationship with God.

For Peter and the others, that day had begun like any other but as they faced the enormity, and the apparent impossibility, of the task Jesus had left them they were taken by surprise as a new life-giving power burst into their lives, equipping them to bear witness to their new faith – a power that would make them like Jesus. It was not easy to describe in words exactly what they experienced, but they knew for certain that this really was the Spirit of God. As a consequence of this experience their hesitating and uncertain trust in Jesus and his promises was remarkably confirmed and from that moment onwards they had no doubt that God's promises to previous generations were actually coming true in their own lives. The church was in the process of being born. More than that, they themselves were being reborn for, in addition to Peter's new-found ability to speak in a powerful way to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem, he and the others discovered that they were also able to perform remarkable deeds in the name of Jesus. If they had ever entertained any residual doubts, the life-transforming power that swept over them was so overwhelming that they needed no further argument to convince them that Jesus was alive and at work in their lives in a unique way. From now on the disciples and those many others who joined them were so totally dominated by their love for the living Jesus and their

desire to serve him that the humdrum concerns of everyday life were forgotten. Instead, the believers ‘spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the common meals and prayers’ (Acts 2:42). As a first step towards beginning to live according to the way of Jesus they even sold their goods and pooled the proceeds. Making money was no longer the most important thing in life: the only things that really mattered were serving God, and sharing their life-changing message with others.

Pentecost

The nature of the disciples' experience on the Day of Pentecost has been much discussed. It has sometimes been suggested that it never happened, and that the story in Acts 2 was intended by Luke to convey some theological lesson rather than to report an actual incident. A typical explanation along these lines would be to seek a background for the narrative in the fact that the festival of Pentecost was traditionally connected to the giving of the Old Testament Law at Mount Sinai. According to the late second-century Rabbi Johanan, the one voice of God at the giving of the Law had divided into seven voices, which had then spoken in seventy different languages. That, together with the fact that wind and fire were present both at Sinai and at the events of Pentecost, is said to be enough to explain the graphic language used by Luke. This kind of explanation seems far less plausible today than it would have done in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, when the rationalist-materialist worldview of the Enlightenment was still dominant, with its underlying assumption that there is no such thing as religious experience and therefore phenomena like speaking in tongues, visions, or other mystical manifestations can only be explained by being reduced to categories of psychology or anthropology. But even on its own terms it is possible to challenge the idea that the Acts narrative is a gloss on traditional Jewish beliefs. There is no evidence at all to show that the rabbis linked Sinai and Pentecost before the second century, which was long after the particular Pentecost to which Luke refers, and indeed much later than the lifetime of Luke himself. The narrative presents a realistic account of what the disciples might have been expected to do under the circumstances, and it is perfectly believable that after the unexpected events of the previous Passover they would have gathered in the way Luke describes, apprehensive about what might happen next. It is probably unlikely that their expectations included what did actually take place, and they might well have been naïvely thinking that, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, there was nothing else left except the end of the world. If so, they were in for a surprise, for the new age of which Jesus had spoken did indeed dawn but not in the way they imagined it, even if Peter later connected it with what the prophet Joel had expected in 'the last days' (Acts 2:17–21).

Like all mystical encounters, their experience defies neat classification. It certainly had some of the common features of visions, as the disciples saw ‘what looked like tongues of fire’ (but were not fire), and heard ‘a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing’ (but which was not the wind). But the result of this experience was clear for others to see: ‘They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak’ (Acts 2:1–4). The most natural understanding of this is that they were speaking in tongues, or ‘glossolalia’ as it is sometimes called. This phenomenon is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament as one of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:5–25), and is also widely known and practised today in churches of many traditions. It is generally agreed that such speaking in tongues is not talking in foreign languages otherwise unknown to the speaker, but a form of ecstatic speech with its own distinctive style and content. Paul certainly perceived a difference, for he contrasted the speaking of ordinary languages with tongues, which he called ‘the language of angels’ (1 Corinthians 13:1, author’s translation). Of course there are those who regard the experience of the Day of Pentecost as the speaking of foreign languages rather than speaking in tongues. But if that was the case, it is hard to see why some who heard it should have concluded that the disciples were drunk (Acts 2:13), while others heard God speaking to them quite clearly in terms that they could understand. Whatever kind of inspired speech the apostles were using, those who were present found themselves caught up by what the followers of Jesus identified as the power of the Spirit, and the message they heard came to them as clearly as if it had been expressed in their own everyday languages.

The church grows

The open friendship and simple lifestyle that characterized the believers' gatherings during these early days in Jerusalem must indeed have seemed like the dawning of a new age. But it was not long before more complex questions reminded Peter and the others that God's kingdom had not yet arrived in all its fullness. Their newly established community of mutual acceptance and sharing was itself proof that the new society had begun, but as time passed, the tension between present and future that was so fundamental in Jesus' teaching was to have disturbing repercussions for the ongoing life of the embryonic church. During Jesus' lifetime the new messianic movement which he founded was for the most part a local sect within Palestinian Judaism. All the disciples were Jews and, though both the logic of Jesus' message and the example of his own practice made it clear that Gentiles were not to be excluded, the issue simply did not arise to any great extent. Those Gentiles whom Jesus encountered were isolated individuals, few in number, and in any case many of them were probably already God-fearers or converts to Judaism and so not completely outside the boundaries of traditional Jewish spirituality (Mark 7:24–30; Luke 7:1–10).

But it was not long before the church was forced to give considerable attention to the whole question of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. Though they did not realize it at the time, the events of the Day of Pentecost were to be a watershed in more ways than one. For when Peter stood up to explain the Christian message to the crowds in Jerusalem he faced a very cosmopolitan audience of 'religious people who had come from every country of the world' (Acts 2:5). Naturally, they must all have been interested in Judaism, or they would not have travelled to Jerusalem for a religious festival. But not all the Gentiles among them would be full converts who had accepted the whole of the Law, while even those who were from Jewish families in various parts of the Roman empire will have had a rather different background and outlook from those who had been born and educated in Judea. A significant number of those listening to Peter's address were probably Greek-speaking Jews who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this great religious festival. Many of them would have been visiting Jerusalem for the first time. Though their homes were far

away, such Jews of the Dispersion always had a warm regard for Jerusalem and its temple. This was the central shrine of their faith, just as it was for their compatriots who lived much nearer to it. Peter and the other disciples had no doubt that the good news about Jesus must also be shared with people like this. Indeed, they had much in common: the disciples themselves were regular supporters of the synagogue services, they also observed the special festivals and on occasions could even be found teaching within the temple precincts (Acts 3:1–26). This was something that Jesus himself had not been able to do without fear of the consequences, and though Peter and John were subsequently arrested and charged before the religious authorities they were soon released and the only restriction imposed on them was that ‘under no condition were they to speak or to teach in the name of Jesus’ (Acts 4:18). Apart from their curious belief in Jesus, their behaviour was generally quite acceptable to the religious authorities.

Tensions and conflicts

It was not long before all this started to change, when an argument arose between some Jews who spoke Greek (‘Hellenists’) and others whose main language was Aramaic (‘Hebrews’). They had all become Christians, perhaps on the Day of Pentecost itself, and some of these ‘Hellenist’ Christians were probably visiting Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman empire (Acts 6:1) – though many Palestinian Jews also spoke Greek, so some of them may have been permanent residents. At any event, those whose main language was Greek felt they were getting an unfair deal in the distribution of funds within the community and as a result of their complaints seven people were appointed to supervise the arrangements for these Hellenistic believers, in addition to the apostles who had the care of the more conservative Hebrew Christians. Though most of those who are named are otherwise unknown, one of them, Stephen, soon demonstrated that he was at least as gifted in theological argument as he was in the administration of funds (Acts 6:2–6). It all started as an argument within the ‘synagogue of the Freedmen’ in Jerusalem. It is not certain just who these ‘Freedmen’ were, but it is a fair guess that they would have been Jews who had come from other parts of the Roman empire, possibly released from some form of slavery, and had then formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem. Stephen himself was presumably a member of this synagogue, and no doubt he supposed that by sharing his new insights into the scriptures he would be able to influence them to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah. But it was not to be. Far from persuading his fellow Hellenists of the truth of the Christian claims, all he managed to do was to convince them that he was a heretic and before long he found himself called to appear before the court of the Sanhedrin.

Stephen and his speech

The account of this in Acts suggests that in order to bring effective charges, Stephen’s accusers had to tell lies by claiming that he announced the end of the temple and the Law itself (Acts 6:13–14). This was the same accusation that Mark 14:57–59 reports as one of the charges against Jesus at his trial, but

whereas on that occasion the false witnesses failed to agree and so other charges had to be found, in the case of Stephen he went on to condemn himself out of his own mouth. In addressing the Sanhedrin Stephen not only admitted the truthfulness of the vague accusations made against him by the witnesses; he also went on to make very specific statements about the subjects in dispute (Acts 7:1–53). With a carefully detailed survey of the history of Israel he argued that the temple ought never to have existed at all. Illustrating his case with copious references to the Hebrew scriptures, he pointed out how Moses had received instructions for the construction of a simple tent as a place of worship in the desert, and this had continued in use long after the time of Moses. Things changed only with the accession of Solomon to the throne, when increased wealth and a new international political stature had inspired him to build a central sanctuary in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5:4–5). The Hebrew Bible suggests that Solomon had divine approval for his actions (1 Kings 9:1–9), but quoting Isaiah 66:1–2 Stephen argued that the temple had been a mistake from the start, for ‘the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands’ (Acts 7:48, NRSV).

This address before the Sanhedrin is one of the longest speeches reported anywhere in the New Testament, and at first sight it seems hardly to be a response to the charges that had been made against him. Because of this, some have suggested that what is contained in Acts 7 was a free composition by the author of Acts to provide an appropriate theological explanation for why the Hellenist Christians began to move away from Jerusalem and to loosen their allegiance to Judaism. This question is not of course restricted to the story of Stephen: it is also relevant to the speeches reportedly delivered by Peter, Paul, and others elsewhere in Acts. Were these speeches based on verbatim reports that were handed down to the author of Acts? Or did he follow the example of a writer like Josephus, who seems to have inserted speeches at will into the mouths of those whose exploits he describes? A number of points may be made.

Obviously, none of the speeches reported in Acts can be verbatim accounts. They are far too short for that, and in any case people in the ancient world were not obsessed with the desire for accurate quotation which is so important today.

This can be seen quite clearly in the way some New Testament writers refer even to the Old Testament. Though it had supreme authority for them, they often quote from no known version but refer to it from memory, regularly introducing inaccuracies as a result. In the case of Stephen's trial, it is unlikely that anyone would have taken extensive notes of what was actually said. The narrative gives the impression that the whole thing took place with great urgency.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that not all ancient historians were like Josephus, and the Greek tradition of history-writing would be better represented by an author like Thucydides. He also felt that the inclusion of speeches at appropriate points in his narrative would help to highlight the important points, but he was not in the habit of simply inventing such speeches, as he explains in the beginning of his History of the Peloponnesian War (1.22.1): '… some speeches I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.' Acts would appear to fit more easily into the Thucydidean mould rather than following the traditions of a person like Josephus. Though its story of early Christianity is undoubtedly selective and incomplete, when it can be tested against external evidence from other sources, it appears to be generally trustworthy.

The speeches in Acts have at least the appearance of authenticity. In subject matter, language, and style they are varied to suit the people who make them. Certainly, so far as Stephen's speech is concerned, its contents are a good fit for the sort of occasion that is described. Whenever dissidents of any kind are on trial for their lives, they often choose to defend not themselves, but the ideals for which they stand, and that is precisely what Stephen did. No doubt he had argued like this many times before within the synagogue itself, and others would likely repeat the same arguments on many subsequent occasions. To that extent, his speech was a confession of faith. It is not unrealistic to imagine that he would be determined to take his own last chance of standing before the highest religious authority and making sure his message was heard there too. It is certainly the sort of thing one can imagine having taken place, and in this respect

it is quite different from the verbose and often irrelevant speeches which Josephus inserted into the mouths of many of his characters.

In addition to its length, Stephen's speech is noteworthy for its contents. With the exception of Hebrews, no other New Testament person or book has much to say about the temple and its services, though outside the New Testament there is evidence of others who questioned the validity of what was going on there. At a much later date, the Epistle of Barnabas adopted a similarly radical attitude to the temple, and some of its strongly anti-Jewish sentiments could easily have been inspired by the story of Stephen. Barnabas was not written until the early second century, much later than the time of Stephen, but it may be possible that Stephen's thinking had connections with the opinions of other groups in Palestine who were certainly around at the same time as him and who also rejected the temple in Jerusalem: the Qumrân community and the Samaritans. Neither of them took part in the worship at the Jerusalem temple, though they each had their own reasons for not doing so, neither of which was quite identical with the convictions that Stephen apparently held. The Qumrân community had imposed on themselves an enforced isolation from Jerusalem. Believing the temple and its priesthood to be corrupt, they had moved out to establish their own monastic community by the shores of the Dead Sea. But they fervently believed that this state of affairs was only temporary: they looked for the messianic age to dawn very soon, and anticipated that when it did they would return to Jerusalem and restore the temple and its worship to its original purity. Unlike Stephen, they did not despise the temple as an institution, but deplored what they regarded as its temporary corruption. The Samaritans were also unable to take part in the temple worship at Jerusalem, though for rather different reasons related to their status as a renegade group within Jewish culture, with their own sanctuary on Mount Gerizim and their own version of the scriptures, which was substantially shorter than that used by the Jews themselves.

There are obvious points of contact between the thinking of the Qumrân community, the Samaritans and Stephen, and the way that Stephen expounded the Hebrew Bible is not unlike the way these others would have used it. But it is unlikely that Stephen had ever been a member of either group, neither of which would have been present in Jerusalem in the first place. It is more likely that his

thinking on the temple was derived from study of the Old Testament and developed spontaneously as a result of the events of the Day of Pentecost and what followed. Through their mystical encounters with the Spirit of God, the believers felt they now had an immediate connection with the divine and that was a good enough reason by itself for regarding the temple as redundant. It had at best been an indirect means of worshipping God, and once people had direct access for themselves then the temple and its rituals became an unnecessary encumbrance for those who were following Jesus. This was never going to end well for Stephen. It was bad enough that he was advocating such opinions about the temple, but when he also accused the religious leaders of wholesale disobedience to the very Law that they professed to uphold (Acts 7:53) he can hardly have been surprised at their reaction. When he committed what they regarded as the final blasphemy by asserting that he could ‘see heaven opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand side of God’ it was a foregone conclusion that he would be dragged out of the council chamber and stoned to death (Acts 7:54–60).

Stephen’s death

The manner of Stephen’s trial and death raises similar legal and procedural questions to the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, it seems likely from the way Luke describes the two episodes that he was consciously intending to draw some connections between the two, maybe to remind his readers that, whatever their undoubted successes, the followers of Jesus could expect to share in the same rejection as Jesus himself had suffered. But whatever the literary motif behind the story might be, the same underlying historical issue arises, namely whether or not the Sanhedrin had the right to execute Stephen in the way Luke describes. At the time, Judea was a Roman province, and in Roman provinces generally the right to execute even convicted criminals was reserved for the Roman governor and no one else. This point was brought out quite clearly in the stories of Jesus’ trials and execution in the gospels, and according to John 18:31 the same religious leaders who were implicated in Stephen’s death had been forced to admit earlier to Pilate that ‘we are not allowed to put anyone to death.’ But this was not the full story and there seems to have been one circumstance in which the Sanhedrin was allowed to carry out a death sentence without reference

to the Roman authorities and this was in the case of someone who violated the sanctity of the temple at Jerusalem. Josephus reports that even a Roman who entered the temple unlawfully could be executed on the orders of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Wars 6.2.4), though this has the appearance of having been a special arrangement, which simply serves to emphasize the weak position of the religious court, for if it already had general powers of jurisdiction in such cases there would have been no need for that sort of special dispensation. In view of the way Stephen had spoken it is always possible that he may have been deemed to have violated the temple and its rights in some way, though it is more likely that his death was not the result of a formal sentence so much as a mob lynching. Acts 7:54–60 does not suggest that any formal verdict was given, but rather that his accusers spontaneously stoned him in their fury. There is evidence of at least one other example of such behaviour, namely the execution of James of Jerusalem in AD 62. Such events would almost certainly have been illegal in terms of Roman law, but the Romans usually chose with care the issues on which to clash with Jewish tradition, and were especially eager to avoid conflicts on matters related to religious faith and practices.

Either way, the story of Stephen’s martyrdom occupies a pivotal position in the book of Acts as one of the most crucial events for the development of the life of the church, with consequences for its future course that were to drive it well away from Jerusalem, or even Palestine, and lead to its rapid expansion throughout the Roman empire.

Leaving Jerusalem

One of the immediate consequences of Stephen's death was a widespread persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem. There is no evidence that a majority of them had adopted the same radical attitude towards the temple as Stephen, but it was perhaps inevitable that people should suppose that most, if not all Christians would share his opinions. It was entirely predictable that the religious establishment should resist this kind of teaching, for Stephen was striking at the very heart of their power base. But the persecution that followed was counter-productive as it led to the dispersal of Christians from Jerusalem itself, especially the most liberal among them. They moved to Caesarea, Antioch, and Damascus – not to mention other, more far-flung cities from which the Hellenist Christians had originally come – and were not just the first Christian refugees, but turned out also to be the first Christian missionaries. By oppressing the church in Jerusalem its opponents only encouraged it to spread to other places.

Not all Christians felt they had to leave Jerusalem, and Acts suggests that those who continued in faithful observance of traditional religious practices were able to stay, even in the face of intense opposition. Luke mentions by name only the apostles, but it is certain that others must have stayed behind, all of them characterized by their commitment to uphold the Jewish faith, while incorporating within it their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. This inevitably meant that the church in Jerusalem became more conservative and more conventionally Jewish, a fact that in due course led to its demise and the extinction of all Judaistic forms of Christianity. But Acts has very little to say about the church in Jerusalem at this time. Instead the attention shifts to the exploits of various Christian leaders elsewhere in Palestine.

Judea and Samaria

Philip is one of the Hellenist Christian leaders singled out for special mention in Acts, and he was no doubt typical of many others. Relatively little is known about him, but he was obviously very successful in communicating the Christian message, especially in Hellenistic cities like Caesarea. Some years later, he and his daughters were leaders of a prosperous Christian community there (Acts 21:8–9), but before settling in Caesarea he had a successful mission among the Samaritans too. From this period, Luke includes the story of how Philip met and baptized an African, an Ethiopian government official who was presumably an adherent of Judaism since he was on his way home from visiting the temple in Jerusalem when Philip met him in the desert. After an extended conversation about the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures, the man declared his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and was baptized there and then (Acts 8:4–25).

Philip had been a member of the same group as Stephen, appointed to oversee the funds for Hellenist Christians, and his close association with Stephen may have been the reason he left Jerusalem. But it was not long before some of Jesus' original disciples also began to travel through the Palestinian countryside to share their message. Individuals like Peter and John had probably never felt at home in the city anyway, for they were themselves from the country and the urban culture of Jerusalem was foreign to them. Moreover, though Jesus had no doubt visited Jerusalem on several occasions, the main centre of his activity was not among the conventionally religious people there but among the more marginalized people of rural Palestine, so it would be natural for the remaining disciples to follow his example. Luke tells of the two of them together visiting the Samaritans who had come to believe in Jesus as a result of Philip's mission (Acts 8:14–17). Perhaps they initially went as an official delegation to check out what Philip was doing, but they soon found themselves affirming and supporting his work. Not only did they recognize his Samaritan converts as true disciples, but they themselves also engaged in teaching among the Samaritans (Acts 8:25). Before long Peter was engaged in an itinerant ministry over a wide area of the Palestinian countryside, visiting Lydda, Joppa, and even Caesarea (Acts 9:32–10:48).

Widening horizons

In the course of such travelling Peter gradually came to realize how important non-Jewish people would be for the future of the church. He had never aligned himself with the more conservative elements in the Jerusalem community, or he would not have been prepared to take his message to the more Hellenized parts of Palestine. It is significant that in the course of this trip, 'Peter stayed in Joppa for many days with a leather-worker named Simon' (Acts 9:43, author's translation). No strictly orthodox Jew would have been prepared to do that as workers in leather were in constant contact with the skins of dead animals, and that made them ritually unclean (Mishnah, Kelia 26.1–9). But Peter was ready to follow the example of Jesus, who never had much time for such prohibitions and was not afraid to have close dealings with all manner of marginalized groups (Luke 15:1–2). While staying with this man, Peter had an experience that was to change his life. In a dream, he saw a large sheet full of creatures that were ritually unclean by the standards of the traditional food laws (Acts 10:1–23). When a voice told him to help himself to a meal from some of these creatures, all his religious instincts told him not to do so – until he was rebuked by the voice (which he now recognized to be God's) telling him, 'Do not consider unclean anything that God has declared clean' (Acts 10:9–16). This was another lesson that Peter must have heard from the lips of Jesus himself (Mark 7:14–23), though in the tense atmosphere of Jerusalem after the death of Stephen he had adopted the more expedient course of following the accepted practices of the culture. But he was about to become caught up in something far larger than arguments about food, and what followed eventually had far-reaching implications for the rest of his entire life's work.

No sooner had Peter woken from his dream than messengers arrived at the door of the house inviting him to accompany them to their master, Cornelius (Acts 10:17–22). He was a Roman centurion based in Caesarea, the main garrison town and the headquarters of the Roman procurators. Peter must have realized the serious implications of going there, both politically and religiously. But after the vision he had little choice, and so not only did he see Cornelius but he entered his home and accepted the Roman's hospitality – something that would

have been quite unthinkable to the Christians back in Jerusalem. Moreover, as Peter spoke with Cornelius and the members of his household the seriousness of their spiritual search was too obvious to ignore. They not only heard what he had to say but they responded warmly to his message, and when they began to speak in tongues just as the apostles themselves had done on the Day of Pentecost Peter knew he could not deny the reality of their experience of the risen Christ. As a result they were baptized and welcomed into the community of the church and – as if to underline his own acceptance of them – Peter stayed in their home for a few days more, no doubt instructing them further in their new faith (Acts 10:24–28).

This was a turning-point for Peter. On his return to Jerusalem the more conservative Christians were not at all pleased, and though his own account of the affair gave them some reassurance the rest of Acts shows that this incident had a deep and lasting impact on Peter's relationship with the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:1–3). Peter was never going to be the leader of the Jerusalem church and before long was displaced by someone who had not even been one of the original disciples: James, the brother of Jesus. In addition, it was not long after Peter's visit to Caesarea that Herod Agrippa I, the ruler of Palestine at the time, initiated a state sponsored persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem. At this time another James, the brother of John and one of the original disciples, was put to death and Peter himself was thrown in prison (Acts 12:1–5). Peter's willingness to reach out to Gentiles with the Christian message may have given Agrippa the opportunity he was looking for to gain the sympathetic support of the religious establishment for his actions against the church, and if so that would be an additional reason why Peter soon fell from prominence among those Christians who also wanted to maintain their traditional Jewish allegiances.

Very little of a specific nature is known about Peter's activities after this point, but what evidence there is connects him not with the Jewish churches in Palestine but with the Gentile churches that were soon to emerge all over the Roman empire. Paul mentions an occasion when Peter visited Antioch in Syria (Galatians 2:11–14), and he also seems to have had some contact with the church at Corinth in Greece (1 Corinthians 1–4). He seems to have travelled extensively, often accompanied by his wife (1 Corinthians 9:5), and according to well-

attested traditions he had strong connections with the church at Rome, and it was there that he was put to death during the persecution of Christians by Nero in about AD 64.

Galilee

Apart from occasional visits to Jerusalem, Jesus spent almost all his life in Galilee. The majority of his followers lived there – many thousands of them according to the gospels – and yet Galilee hardly ever features in the remainder of the New Testament. The story of Acts deals exclusively with the exploits of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and in the Gentile cities of the Roman empire, while the New Testament letters mostly relate to the same set of circumstances and none of them can unequivocally be connected with continuing communities of disciples in Galilee. It is not difficult to see the reasons for this. Luke is the only New Testament writer to have produced anything like a history of the church, and he himself was a Gentile which ensured that his main interest would be in the work of Paul and others like him who had been instrumental in spreading the gospel to the major centres of Hellenistic population. Moreover, he and others were writing for Gentiles and for them Palestine was a little-known remote outpost of the empire, and small internal distinctions such as the difference between Galilee and Judea must have been relatively insignificant to people who scarcely knew the location of either of them. In his gospel Luke did not always distinguish the two areas with as much precision as the other evangelists, and in Acts the only real distinction that he makes is between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. A native of Palestine would not have seen it like that. The Judeans had little time for the people of Galilee: it was too open to Gentile influences for their liking, and the fact that Jesus originated there was to many people a good reason for paying no attention to him (John 1:46).

Despite the fact that followers of Jesus in Galilee would tend to be ignored by Gentile Christians and despised by those from Jerusalem, it is reasonable to assume that they must have continued to flourish. Popular movements like that built up by Jesus do not vanish overnight, especially in a rural area. But what happened to his thousands of followers in Galilee? Some of them had certainly accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, convinced to the very end that he was about to set up a new nationalist government that would overthrow the Roman rule. Judas Iscariot seems to have thought that way, and when Jesus died in apparent defeat such people probably just went back home to look for another leader. But not all

Jesus' followers went with him on his last journey to Jerusalem and not all of them had an exclusively political view of his message. These others presumably continued the work that Jesus had started in Galilee, and may easily have developed their own continuing communities of his followers independently of what was going on in Jerusalem. There are certainly some indications to support such a view.

Galilee had always been different from Jerusalem, with its own ways of doing things and its own religious traditions, most of which were despised by the more orthodox and conservative religious leaders in Jerusalem. In view of this background it is not especially likely that the church in Jerusalem would have wanted any involvement with affairs in Galilee, nor would the Galilean followers of Jesus have been eager to accept the authority of the Jerusalem church and its leaders.

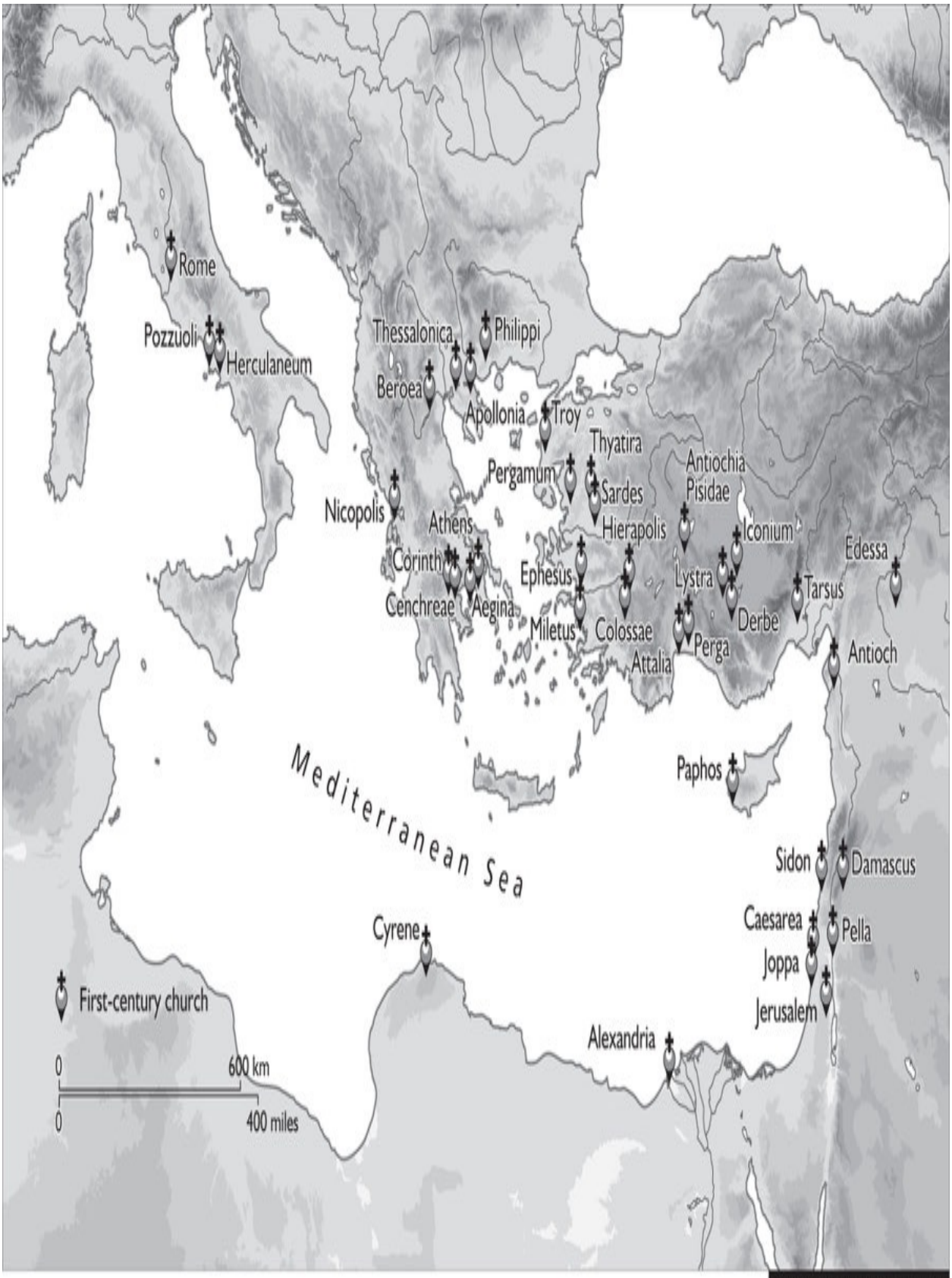
The very character of these leaders must have been an influential factor in the development of the Galilean church. After the expulsion of the Hellenists, the church in Jerusalem seems to have taken a very conservative direction. Members of some of the same religious groups that had been so strongly opposed to Jesus actually rose to positions of influence in the church itself (Acts 6:7; 15:5), and there are compelling reasons for thinking that James, the main Jerusalem leader, was himself a Pharisee. Presumably in aligning themselves with the Christian cause they had acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, though that seems to have made little difference to their general outlook and behaviour. They were still firmly committed to upholding traditional rituals and customs, as can be seen from the reception they gave Peter after his visit to Cornelius (Acts 11:1–4). It can hardly be a coincidence that Peter and the other original disciples did not remain for long in Jerusalem. Persecution from the authorities and resistance to their more liberal ways from within the church itself soon forced them to leave the city. Did they return home, to Galilee?

The assumption that they did fits neatly with the evidence relating to Peter, and

provides a plausible explanation for what he might have been doing between the time when he left Jerusalem and the slightly later stage at which there is evidence for him travelling the Roman empire as an itinerant evangelist. Was it in the familiar surroundings of Galilee that he worked out his own approach to the questions raised by the admission of Gentiles to the church? If there is any truth at all in those traditions that connect Peter to the Gospel of Mark, then it is noteworthy that one of Mark's central themes is the way in which the people of Galilee received the message of Jesus gladly while the inhabitants of Jerusalem consistently rejected it. Could this emphasis reflect Peter's thinking about the direction being taken by the church at Jerusalem during this period?

Two other New Testament books have from time to time been connected with the Galilean churches: James and Hebrews. Both of them have clear Jewish connections, and both are difficult to identify with what is known of the sort of beliefs that were held in the church at Jerusalem. James has an uncomplicated understanding of the Christian message with many connections in both style and substance to the message of Jesus himself as reported in the gospels, while Hebrews not only seems to show some acquaintance with the traditions about Jesus but also sets out to demonstrate the irrelevance of Jerusalem and its temple – something that would be welcomed by Galileans.

No one will ever know for sure exactly what happened to the followers of Jesus in Galilee, for their story was never written down. There does however seem to be sufficient evidence to suggest that the movement started there by Jesus did not die out but probably grew and flourished, at least for the lifetime of his original disciples.



Spread of the Early Church.

Other apostles and their travels

In common with the synoptic gospels, Acts lists twelve special disciples of Jesus, yet apart from Peter, James, John, and Judas Iscariot, none of them feature prominently in either the gospels or Acts, and even Peter disappears from the narrative to be replaced by Paul who was not one of the original twelve. It is natural to be curious about what happened to these other disciples and though they are never mentioned in the rest of the New Testament they do appear in some other early Christian writings.

Thomas supposedly went to India where he died as a Christian martyr, though not before he had persuaded a notable Indian ruler and his family to believe in Jesus. The Mar Thoma church in Kerala (south-west India) claims that he was its founder, though it is more likely that it was established by other missionaries from the church in Edessa, by the banks of the River Euphrates. Eusebius says that Thomas himself went to India, and perhaps that is why the Indian Christians regard him as their patron saint (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.1.1).

Andrew is said to have travelled extensively throughout Greece and Asia Minor, even crossing to the northern shore of the Black Sea. His life was allegedly characterized by miraculous deeds, including the resurrection of thirty-nine dead sailors washed up from a shipwreck! However, when the proconsul's wife in the Greek city of Patrae became a Christian, her husband was so enraged that he had Andrew crucified on a cross shaped like the letter X. Other legends claim that sometime between the fourth and ninth centuries, his arm-bone was taken by Regulus to Scotland, where Andrew became the patron saint and his cross the national flag.

Thaddaeus is mentioned in the New Testament only by Matthew and Mark.

According to Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History 1.13), a person of that name was connected with the establishment of the church in Edessa. The story tells how Agbar, king of Edessa, had written a letter to Jesus asking that he be healed of a disease, and in his reply Jesus said that after his ascension Thaddaeus would be sent to heal him. But other traditions connect Thaddaeus with Africa.

Philip and Bartholomew feature in stories about their travels around Asia Minor, accompanied by Philip's sister Mariamne. The Acts of Philip describes encounters with dragons and other beasts who speak to them, with Philip finally being martyred in Hierapolis, though Clement of Alexandria suggests that he lived to old age. Bartholomew has also been connected with a mission to India.

Matthew is said to have preached in Judea for eight years after the ascension before going off to Ethiopia and Arabia. Papias identifies him in a somewhat indeterminate way with the Gospel of Matthew.

James the son of Alphaeus is mentioned in Spanish traditions that tell how Theodorus, Bishop of Iria, discovered his tomb at Santiago in 835, apparently guided there by a star.

Simon the Zealot travelled to England, according to some stories, together with Lazarus and Joseph of Arimathea.

We cannot trust any of these traditions about the 'unknown' apostles. Some of them may conceivably be based on vague recollections of their exploits but on the whole their stories are just designed to fill in the gaps in the New Testament accounts and are unlikely to have any independent historical value.

Telling the stories: Luke’s second volume

Though they are not grouped alongside each other in the New Testament, it is widely agreed that the book of Acts belongs with the Gospel of Luke. They are both addressed to the same person, Theophilus, and Acts continues the story of Jesus by describing how his small group of disciples expanded to become a worldwide movement. Despite its title, Acts does not in fact tell the story of all the apostles: many of Jesus’ first disciples are not mentioned at all and the narrative mostly concerns Peter and Paul, with a few references to the activities of other early Christian leaders such as Philip, John, James the brother of Jesus, and Stephen. Nor is it restricted only to the acts of these individuals, for it also contains extensive references to their teaching. The book falls naturally into two parts. The first is concerned mainly with events in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine, and here Peter is the leading character (chapters 1–12). The second section tells the story of Paul (chapters 13–28), though there are some integrating features in the narrative for Paul makes his first appearance at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58), while Peter is still a major player in Luke’s story of the Council of Jerusalem, which is essentially a part of the story of Paul (Acts 15:7–11).

Author

Who wrote the book of Acts? Or, to put the question more accurately, who wrote the two volumes, Luke and Acts? There is no doubt they were both written by the same person. They are both addressed to Theophilus, and their style and language are identical. Other considerations have already been outlined in the earlier discussion of Luke's Gospel, where it was concluded that all the evidence points to the author being Luke, the Gentile physician who accompanied Paul on some of his travels.

Date

The date of Acts is a more complicated matter and three main suggestions have been made.

Second century

Scholars belonging to the nineteenth-century Tübingen School believed that Acts must have been written sometime after AD 100, and though this view has by no means won a majority following it still has some supporters. Two main considerations are usually advanced.

Acts 5:36–37 refers to two individuals called Theudas and Judas, and 21:38 mentions an Egyptian troublemaker. Since Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews 20.5.1 seems to describe the same events, and since this was not published until AD 93, Acts, it is claimed, must have been written later than that. But there is no textual or stylistic evidence to support the idea that Luke used Josephus's account as a source for this own, and his description of these people actually has significant differences from what Josephus says, which means it is only possible to connect the two by making the further assumption that Luke misunderstood Josephus's story when he read it.

It is also suggested that Acts was written in about the middle of the second century to counteract the influence of Marcion (AD 85–160). Among other things, Marcion was suggesting that the first disciples of Jesus had misunderstood the point of his teaching and that Paul was the only true interpreter of Jesus. It is certainly true that Acts was read with renewed interest at the time of Marcion, but its story shows little sign of the kind of

misunderstanding that Marcion emphasized. There is no real trace of second-century concerns in Luke's writings, while there are plenty of indications to connect it with the period that it purports to describe.

AD 62–70

At the opposite extreme of what is historically plausible, other scholars have suggested that Acts was written almost at the same time as the events it describes and therefore immediately after Paul's arrival in Rome (AD 62–64). The following arguments are said to favour such an early date.

Acts ends with Paul in Rome 'teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered' (Acts 28:31, RSV). Since we know that Paul died in the persecution inaugurated by Nero in the late sixties, it is argued that if Acts was written after his death then it would be strange to find no mention of this. That proposal tends to assume that Acts was intended to be a Life of Paul, whereas Luke's more likely purpose was to document and explain the spread of the Christian faith from Jerusalem to Rome, and once Paul had arrived there that intention was fulfilled. We have previously noted the significance of the journey motif in Luke's Gospel, and Acts 1:8 indicates that this theme was also used as the thread that would hold together the stories of the apostles, as they shared the message 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (NRSV). It was inevitable that later readers would be curious to know what eventually happened to Paul. Did he appear before the emperor's court, and what was the outcome? Eusebius supplemented Luke's story with the information that 'after defending himself the apostle was sent again on his ministry of preaching, and coming a second time to the same city suffered martyrdom under Nero' (Ecclesiastical History 2.22). 1 Clement 5 (written about AD 95) also suggested that Paul visited Spain during this short time of freedom, which has convinced some that it was during this period that Paul penned the 'Pastoral Epistles' of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Whether or not Paul went on such further travels, all the evidence indicates that he was beheaded during Nero's persecution in about

AD 64.

A more substantial argument in favour of an early date is the way that Acts adopts a generally favourable attitude to the Roman authorities. Paul's Roman citizenship is constantly highlighted as an invaluable asset that gave him freedom to travel in peace all over the empire. Roman officials are always on his side: Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus who became a Christian (Acts 13:6–12); Gallio, the proconsul in Corinth who gave him a fair hearing (Acts 18:12–17), and even the Roman commander in Jerusalem who rescued him from a hostile mob (Acts 21:31–40). They all look favourably on Paul's mission, and Acts gives the impression that, if the empire was not exactly supporting the church, it certainly was not its sworn enemy. All that changed with Nero and official persecution of one sort or another continued spasmodically through to the end of the first century. On this basis it is argued that Acts must have been written prior to AD 64. Like the other one, this proposition ultimately depends on a more or less subjective estimate of what an ancient writer might have been expected to do in the circumstances. In reality, there is no way of telling whether or to what extent any author might allow his or her perception of historical events to be affected by what later took place, and if Acts can be regarded as a reasonably faithful presentation of the period it describes, then its apparent pro-Roman bias may simply reflect the facts of the situation. It may also reflect Luke's own experience as a member of the Roman upper-classes.

Acts does not seem to contain any hint of the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and if Jerusalem had been destroyed before the work was written it is claimed that we might have expected a mention of the fact, for it would have been a striking vindication of Luke's viewpoint on Judaism, and indeed on Jewish Christianity. Again, this argument depends on the assumption that it is possible to know precisely what was in the mind of an ancient author and what he or she might be expected to write in given circumstances.

Another relevant fact is that Acts makes no mention at all of the letters that Paul wrote to his churches. This almost certainly implied that Acts was written before

the letters were collected together and circulated more widely, which would definitely date Acts earlier than a writing like 2 Peter, which mentions Paul's letters as a part of the Christian scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

AD 80–85

The consensus opinion is to reject both a second-century date for Acts and a very early date in the sixties of the first century. On this understanding, it was probably written sometime between AD 80 and 90. Two substantial reasons seem to support this.

Acts 1:1 begins with the words: 'In my first book I wrote about all the things that Jesus did and taught'. We know that this 'first book' was Luke's Gospel, and that when he wrote that he incorporated stories and sayings of Jesus derived from Mark, which seems to have been written between 60 and 65. On this reckoning, Luke's first volume can hardly be placed much earlier than about 65–70, which in turn means that Acts, as the second volume, cannot have been written as early as 62–64. This is a persuasive argument though it is not the final word, for it has at least two weak spots. Firstly, it depends on the date assigned to Mark, which to some extent is a matter of scholarly guesswork, though good reasons can be put forward in support of the generally held view. Secondly, it is also possible that the prologues of both Luke and Acts were added last, when the two books were in their final form. If Luke's Gospel existed in some other form before its final edition (whether or not that can be identified more specifically as Streeter's 'Proto-Luke'), then maybe that reflected Luke's way of working, and Acts also may have been written in stages. The passages where Luke uses 'we' rather than 'they' could have been just the first of several editions of Luke's story of the early church, an original account that was later expanded to include stories about the early Jerusalem church, perhaps brought to Luke's attention during his stay in Caesarea while Paul was in prison there. It is therefore always possible that the central core of Acts could have been written before the gospel, with only the prologue being added later to commend it to Theophilus.

There is however a more substantial reason for dating Acts later than the lifetime of Paul. Luke's writing often seems to show signs of attitudes and beliefs that were common in the post-apostolic age. Indeed, Luke and Acts together have been regarded as a manifesto of what scholars refer to as 'early catholicism'. This subject is dealt with more extensively in chapter 20, where it is argued that the emergence of so-called 'catholic Christianity' was a natural, almost imperceptible development of certain elements within the teaching of the apostles themselves. Whatever the outcome of that debate, however, Luke does have a distinctive outlook that in many respects corresponds to a form of church life that was more prevalent in the later first century. For instance, by reading only Acts it would be easy to get the impression that the early church had a largely uncontroversial existence, whereas Paul's letters (all of them born out of controversy) paint a different picture. No doubt it was a part of Luke's intention to stress that there was fundamental agreement between all sections of the early church, and up to a point Paul himself wanted to argue the same for he went out of his way to emphasize his own continuity with the earliest disciples. But that is only a part of the picture, and Paul's letters more typically reveal him as a person who had profound disagreements not only with his enemies but on occasion with his friends as well. Of course, Paul's letters also show him as a very impulsive person and it is quite possible that some of the issues he wrote about with such passion turned out to be less serious than he thought at the time, and Luke, writing some time later, could take a more detached view of these things and see them in their proper perspective, both in the life of Paul and in the ongoing experience of the church. This does not mean that Luke was any less a friend or even a disciple of Paul, for good teachers do not turn out students who are clones of themselves, but encourage them to develop their own distinctive thinking. In any case, as we shall see below, the positions that Luke adopts in Acts differ from Paul in the details rather than on the fundamentals.

The real choice for the date of Acts is between the sixties and the eighties of the first century, and the balance of probability favours a date in the eighties, perhaps around AD 85.

Character

What sort of book is the Acts of the Apostles? It is sometimes referred to as a history of the early church, but of course it is not a comprehensive history: there are so many things it does not include that it is clearly not the full story of early Christianity. Instead, it is a selective story, drawing attention to those people and movements that Luke believed to be especially significant. Luke did the same in writing his gospel, selecting those aspects of the life and teaching of Jesus that would be most relevant to the concerns of his readers and in Acts he covers those incidents which for him typified the trend of events among the first generation of Christians. He wanted to show how Christianity spread from Jerusalem to Rome and everything that he included was intended to illuminate that transition. In the process, he omitted many things that today's readers might have wished to know about. What happened to Peter? How did James get on in the church at Jerusalem? What became of Jesus' other disciples? Luke simply ignores these questions because they were not relevant to his purpose.

This means that his story is also an interpretation of the progress of the early church. All history, of course, is an interpretation of past events, and the book of Acts therefore raises many of the same questions already dealt with in connection with the gospels. Much of what has been said in previous chapters can also be applied to the understanding of the historical nature of Acts, and there is no point in covering the same ground again here. Stylistically, there is no doubt that Luke was a good storyteller and knew how to relate events so as to grab the imagination of his readers. His accounts of riots, conversions, arrests, imprisonments, and a shipwreck are all told with the sort of imaginative creativity that is familiar from other literature of the day. Indeed, there was a whole genre of Acts that celebrated the accomplishments of great military and political figures, and the tradition was continued by Christian writers in the second century with works such as The Acts of Paul and Thecla or The Acts of John. The fact that Luke narrated the stories with creativity does not mean that they are historically ungrounded. As with the gospels, we are dealing here with what today would be called oral history. Different people would tell it in their own distinctive ways, and Acts reflects the way that Luke, from his own

experience and background, saw the history of the earliest church.

There are in fact a number of reasons for thinking that his account is an essentially authentic depiction of life in the period which it describes.

In the prologue to his gospel (Luke 1:1–4) Luke gives some indication of his working practices: he read all that he could find, sifted through it and then wrote his own considered account of what had happened. In the case of the gospel it is possible to see pretty clearly how he went about it, for the end product can be directly compared with Mark which was one of his major source documents. The way he used Mark shows him to have been a careful writer, aware of the need to reproduce his sources accurately and without distortion. There is no comparable direct access to whatever sources he may have used in the writing of Acts, though it is widely surmised that he relied on written information for at least the stories of early events in Jerusalem and Samaria (chapters 1–9). The natural assumption has to be that he would exercise the same care in compiling this narrative as he had previously taken with the gospel. In addition to that, he was himself personally present for at least some of the events in Acts (the ‘we passages’).

The picture Acts presents of life in the earliest Palestinian churches is consistent with what might be expected. Much of the theology which Luke attributes to those earliest Christian believers has a less sophisticated character than the theology either of Paul or of the church later in the first century. For example, Jesus is referred to as ‘the Messiah’ (Christ) in Acts 2:36; 3:20; 4:27, and he can be called ‘the Servant of God’ (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:25–30), or even in one instance ‘the Son of Man’ (a title much used by Jesus himself but found nowhere in the rest of the New Testament except Acts 7:56). The Christians are called simply ‘disciples’ (for example, in Acts 6:1–7; 9:1, 25–26), and the church itself is ‘the Way’ (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). This same realism can be seen in Luke’s description of the Roman world and its officials. He invariably uses the correct terminology to describe Roman administrators, and sometimes uses expressions

that would only be familiar to people living in particular cities. Sergius Paulus and Gallio are correctly designated ‘proconsuls’ (Acts 13:7–8; 18:12). The rulers in Philippi are accurately described as the stratēgoi which was not their official designation but is known from other evidence to have been in regular use as a colloquial term by the inhabitants of the city (Acts 16:12, 20–22). Another similar example is Luke’s use of the term ‘politarchs’ to describe the rulers of Thessalonica (Acts 17:8). This word is found nowhere else in Latin or Greek literature, though an inscription from Thessalonica applies it to the authorities there. Since it was a local expression, only someone who had actually been there would have been likely to use it. There are also many other points at which Luke’s narration can be shown to depend on direct and reliable knowledge of the Roman world as it actually was in the times and places he was describing.

The same concern for authenticity also comes through in Luke’s reporting of the problems of the early church. The only real controversy that appears in Acts is concerned with the relationship of Jewish and Gentile Christians. This argument rapidly diminished in importance, and after AD 70 was of no significant interest at all except as a theological debating point. At the time when Luke was writing, other issues were far more prominent – efforts to define heresy and orthodoxy, and various power struggles between different factions within the church – though these later concerns never feature in the Acts story.

There is just one point that may at first sight appear to undermine confidence in Luke’s general trustworthiness as a historian, and that is his treatment of Paul. Paul’s letters do seem to present a somewhat different angle on his life and teaching from the picture of him in Acts. Perhaps surprisingly, if our only information came from Acts we would not know that Paul ever wrote any letters at all. Luke may of course have regarded them as personal letters, and they were all certainly written to address specific situations that were not directly relevant to Luke’s main purpose of telling how the church spread throughout the empire. A similar reasoning probably helps to explain why the sort of topics dealt with in the letters never surface in the accounts of Paul’s doings in Acts. Paul’s letters were all written to Christians, whereas in Acts he is usually addressing non-Christians. There has been plenty of speculation about the content of Paul’s initial preaching to the Galatians, Corinthians, Thessalonians, and others, but it

is impossible to know for certain what he would typically have told them. One thing we can be sure of is that he would present his message in a different way to engage the attention of the unconverted than he would when trying to correct the errors of those who were already Christians. It is noteworthy that in the only instance where Acts reports an address to Christians by Paul (Acts 20:17–38), the substance of his message is not materially different from the typical content of his letters. Even his message at Athens (Acts 17:22–31) is not significantly different from what he wrote on the same subject in Romans 1:18–2:16. Though Luke is sometimes described as a theologian, he certainly did not have the same professional interest in such matters as Paul did, and where he describes Paul's teaching Luke does so in the sort of language that might be expected of a non-specialist.

Purpose

Though he does not address their problems directly, Luke must have hoped that his first readers would learn something from his story to help their own Christian thinking. He may therefore have had at least three primary aims in view.

Perhaps the main thing that comes out clearly from Acts is the conviction that Christianity is a faith with the potential to change the world. Indeed, through Paul and others it did change the world, and the secret of its success was the endowment of the Holy Spirit bestowed on them in a context of mystical encounters with the risen Jesus. Luke sought to encourage his readers to follow the example of those who had been Christians before them, and to realize that they could do for their generation what Paul had achieved in his.

Luke also seems to go out of his way to emphasize that Christianity did not need to be at odds with the Roman empire. By emphasizing that Christian faith was a true development of Judaism (to which the Romans extended legal protection) he commended Christianity to the authorities, perhaps typified by Theophilus for whom he wrote. But he also encouraged his Christian readers to understand that Nero was the exception rather than the rule, and most officials were honest and trustworthy.

In view of the claim made at the beginning of his gospel, we must also take seriously the position of Luke as the first historian of Christianity. His two books were addressed to Theophilus to inform him about the facts of the Christian faith, and the procedure that Luke adopted for compiling his story suggests that he had a historian’s interest in finding out about the past for its own sake. As the church developed into a significant community within the Roman world it was important for its members to know their origins and history, and Luke was perhaps the first person to set some of it out in a systematic form.

CHAPTER 13

PAUL: FROM PERSECUTOR TO APOSTLE

The narrative in Acts soon moves on from Peter and the other disciples of Jesus to focus on one of the most important figures in the life of the early church: Paul, the Pharisee. He was not the only Pharisee to become a Christian (Acts 15:5), but he was certainly the best-known of them. Unlike the first generation of Christians, Paul was not born in Palestine, though he was a Jew. His home was in the city of Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia, and he was also a Roman citizen (Acts 22:3, 27) though he did not always claim its privileges.

Early life

There were probably two distinct periods in Paul’s early life: his childhood, spent in Tarsus, and his adolescence and early adult years which were spent in Jerusalem. The words usually translated ‘brought up’ in Acts 22:3 could indicate that Paul was only a baby when he moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem, though it is more likely that they refer to the period of his formal education, which would mean he was resident in Jerusalem predominantly during his teenage years, or perhaps a little earlier. Since he returned to Tarsus after he became a Christian this seems the most obvious meaning of the expression.

Tarsus

First and foremost Paul was a Jew, and incredibly proud of it – as he was also of the reputation of Tarsus, which was a notable university town and centre of government and trade. Though efforts have been made from time to time to discover the influence of formal Greek rhetoric behind the structure of some of his letters, there is little evidence that he had any specialized Hellenistic education, and the general cultural ethos of this kind of city is probably sufficient to explain the three mentions of Greek literature found in Paul's letters and speeches: references to the poets Epimenides (Acts 17:28), Aratus (Acts 17:28, Titus 1:12), and Menander (1 Corinthians 15:33). Since Paul's parents were Roman citizens, they must have been quite liberal in their attitude towards non-Jewish culture. Though he did not necessarily find all aspects of the lifestyle of Hellenistic culture equally appealing, Paul had a robust appreciation for life in the urban centres of the empire and a sympathetic understanding of the pressures faced by those who were trying to follow Jesus' teaching and example in such a context. Quite early in life Paul's parents decided that he should become a student and teacher of the Jewish Law. He would have learned the traditions of his people through regular instruction at the local synagogue throughout his childhood, though as a Jew of the Dispersion his first Bible would be the Greek version (the Septuagint) rather than the Hebrew Bible. Paul also learned a practical trade, something that was expected of all students of the Torah. Paul occasionally mentions that this offered opportunities for talking with people about his faith, as well as enabling him to have some financial independence from the churches he founded. Paul's occupation is conventionally described as 'tent-making', though he himself never identifies the nature of his work. The evidence for this derives from a single statement that Paul had the same trade as his friends Aquila and Prisca (Acts 18:2–3), where they are described as skēnopoioi. It so happens that this word is relatively rare in literature of the time, and the 'tent' (skēnē) in question invariably refers not to tents in general, but to the changing room for actors in the theatre where they would don masks and costumes, and which on occasion also served as background scenery. More generally, anyone who made costumes or scenery for the theatre came to be referred to as a skēnopoios, something that is also reflected in the Latin Vulgate translation of the New Testament, where Paul and his friends are described as scenofactoriae artis (the normal Latin word for 'tent' would have been tectum). It

is unclear at what point Paul's occupation came to be understood as making 'tents' in the modern sense of the word, though the theatrical connection sheds light on many aspects not only of his travels but also the imagery used in some of his most notable writings. We know that Paul met up with Aquila and Prisca in several locations around the Mediterranean so they were clearly a mobile couple with an international business, and in light of Luke's description of their trade it is reasonable to imagine that they were perhaps working with a travelling theatre. In relation to Paul, it is instructive to note not only his use of theatrical imagery, but also that when the citizens of Ephesus wanted to find him and hold him to account for slandering their favourite deity they went first to the theatre, presumably because that is where they expected to find him – and they did (Acts 19:29).

Jerusalem

As a young man Paul left Tarsus for Jerusalem where he became a student of the learned Rabbi Gamaliel, the grandson and successor of Hillel who was one of the greatest rabbis of all time. Hillel (60 BC–AD 20) took a more liberal approach to the Law than his rival Shammai, and many interpreters believe that what Jesus said about divorce may have been provoked by arguments between the disciples of these two rabbis (Mark 10:1–12). Applying the Law's teaching literally, Shammai insisted that divorce was justified only in the event of some serious breakdown, whereas Hillel took the view that a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him in any way. What Paul himself later wrote on this subject suggests he must have changed his mind after he became a Christian (1 Corinthians 7), though he gained at least one significant benefit from his education in the tradition of Hillel. Shammai could see no place for the Gentiles in the purposes of God, but his rival not only welcomed them but intentionally invited them to consider the Jewish faith. No doubt it was from Gamaliel that Paul first came to appreciate the enormous spiritual potential for introducing the God of the ancient scriptures to the Gentile population of the Roman empire. Paul progressed well in his studies at Jerusalem, and by all accounts was a highly successful student (Galatians 1:14). Though the exact position to which he rose in Judaism is never clearly spelled out, he had sufficient influence that when Christians were being tried for their faith he found himself in a position to 'cast his vote' against them, either in a synagogue assembly or even possibly in the supreme religious council, the Sanhedrin (Acts 26:10, NRSV).

Paul's life

➡ 10 BC–0 BC

Birth of Jesus

➡ 20 BC–30 BC

Jesus’ death and resurrection

Forming of church in Jerusalem (Pentecost)

➡ 30 BC–40 BC

Conversion of Paul

Paul visits Jerusalem

➡ 40 BC–50 BC

First missionary journey

Council of Jerusalem

Galatians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

Second missionary journey

➡ 50 BC–60 BC

Second missionary journey (cont.)

1 Corinthians

? Philippians

2 Corinthians

Third missionary journey

Romans

Paul in prison at Ephesus?

Paul in prison at Caesarea

➡ 60 BC–70 BC

Journey to Rome

Colossians

Philemon

Ephesians

? Philippians

Paul at Rome

Death of Paul

Fall of Jerusalem

➡ 70 BC–AD

? 1 Timothy

? Titus

? 2 Timothy

Influences

Like any other young person, Paul's character was formed by many diverse influences in his early life, and the complex interaction of them with his inherited temperamental disposition and his religious upbringing holds many clues to the person he became, both as a Jew and as a Christian.

Judaism

Paul himself never explicitly mentions Hellenistic influences, but he makes many statements about his Jewish background and upbringing. To the very end of his life he remained proud of the fact that he was a good Pharisee and his many letters reveal that, even as a Christian leader, he never rejected the fundamental worldview and beliefs of his teachers. The differences of opinion on matters of faith between the Pharisees and the Sadducees appear at several points both in the narratives of Acts and in his own letters, and on every point of dispute between these two groups Paul always took up, and often elaborated upon, the viewpoint of the more liberal Pharisees. A central Pharisaic belief was the conviction that history has a goal and a purpose, and that God was ordering events according to a specific plan that would culminate with the coming of the Messiah to lead the people. Paul warmly embraced this view as a Christian and in Romans 9–11 used it to explain the rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the mainstream of the Jewish world, by suggesting that God was ordering the course of history with a view to the ultimate salvation of both Gentiles and Jews alongside one another, incorporated into one inclusive community of God's people.

The Pharisees also had distinctive beliefs about a future life, and Paul stressed this to his own advantage when on trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6–10) and again before Herod Agrippa II (Acts 26:6–8). But as a Christian Paul went further for he also wanted to add that the only guarantee that there would ever be a resurrection was to be found in the fact that Jesus himself had risen from the dead. Pharisees believed in the existence of angels and demons and Paul also retained this belief as a Christian, but transformed it in the light of his experience of Christ by linking it to the cross, through which he believed Jesus had vanquished the powers of evil. Though Paul had a developed angelology, he always understood angels to be heavenly beings serving as God's messengers: they could never rival the living Christ, in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:19, NRSV). It was not only in terms of specific beliefs that Paul continued to respect and celebrate his Jewish heritage. The way he wrote and reasoned, using scriptural passages to argue theological points, was

taken directly from his training as a Pharisee. No one who reads his letter to the Galatians can fail to be amazed, and sometimes surprised, by the way that Paul draws what can seem to be very unusual meanings from what look like quite straightforward Old Testament passages. For instance, he was arguing like a Jewish rabbi when he claimed that the promises made to Abraham referred to one single person, Jesus, because the Greek word for ‘offspring’ (like its English equivalent) is a collective singular word and not plural in form (Galatians 3:16). Like the rabbis, Paul argued from single isolated texts and could merge passages taken from completely different, and unrelated, parts of the Old Testament.

These specific points of agreement between Paul’s upbringing as a Pharisee and the beliefs he continued to hold as a Christian are, however, relatively trivial compared with what Paul appears to have regarded as a major break between his own original beliefs and his convictions as a Christian. In recent years there has been very considerable discussion of the nature of Paul’s relationship to Judaism, all focused on his attitude to the Torah. Put simply, when Paul compared and contrasted Christianity with Judaism – as he did especially in Galatians and Romans – was he being fair to Jewish beliefs about the Law or was he setting up a misleading caricature that was then predictably easy for him to dismiss? Ever since Martin Luther (1483–1546) found in Paul’s teaching the key to his own liberation from mindless rule-keeping, Paul has been understood as an apostle of faith and freedom over against narrow-minded legalists who insisted on detailed observance not only of the actual Law of the Hebrew scriptures but also of traditional laws and customs for which there was no biblical authority. That is not a picture that Jewish sources present. Far from being an oppressed people struggling hard to keep a Law that was always beyond their moral grasp, the rabbis projected an image of committed believers joyfully observing the Law as part of their total response to the love of God as they had experienced it. It is easy to drive a wedge between Paul and Judaism at this point, by insisting that the one emphasized faith (believing) and the other works (doing). The truth is more nuanced than that. For Paul, believing was not essentially an intellectual exercise but a personal belief in the risen Christ, and his complaint about those who thought they could work for divine acceptance was not intended to set works and faith in opposition to each other, but to commend faith-with-works over against works-without-faith. In recent years, the discussion of this topic has become a major occupation among scholars, and we will need to return to it in later chapters. Here it is worth making three general observations.

Specific information about Judaism in the first century is very limited and the most comprehensive accounts of Jewish theology come from the period of the Mishnah (mid-second century onwards) and even later. After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, Judaism was forced to reimagine itself without the temple and underwent a considerable period of uncertainty and radical change. All the evidence relating to Jewish thinking dates back to this time. Of course, it would be unreasonable to imagine that the second-century rabbis invented their views from nothing, and we can be certain that the understanding of the faith that emerged then would be largely a systematic reordering of traditional beliefs that went back much further. Nevertheless, the lack of hard evidence that is itself contemporary with the New Testament should at least introduce a note of caution into the debate, for Paul's evidence is indisputably first-hand.

When we enquire about Paul's overall attitude to his Jewish heritage the picture that emerges is more complex and more carefully nuanced than it can be made to look on the basis of some of the texts. For instance, Paul never complained that Judaism had not satisfied him as an intellectual system. On the contrary, he repeatedly expressed his satisfaction with it (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:6). Moreover, he never abandoned the belief that somehow the Jewish people would remain central to the divine plan, and though he expressed considerable anguish that his compatriots refused to recognize Jesus as their Messiah that did not prevent him from remaining committed to them (Acts 21:17–26) and anticipating that they would ultimately share in the benefits of God's kingdom (Romans 9–11). It is too simplistic to portray Paul as having abandoned Judaism, still less to imagine that he could be described as anti-Semitic. The thing that really made a difference was his personal encounter with the living Christ on the Damascus road. This was the ultimate source of his Christian faith and the rest of his life was spent struggling to understand how, if Judaism was based on a revelation of God's will, it could be understood in the light of his experience on that day.

Since Paul had a personal vested interest, not in seeing Judaism undermined, but

in transforming it on the basis of the fresh insights he believed had been entrusted to him, it is inherently unlikely that he would have deliberately misrepresented it. Regardless of what the rabbis thought Judaism ought to be about, it is hard to get away from the conclusion that Paul himself did actually know Jewish believers who were self-righteous legalists. In any book-based religion there will always be a problem with narrow-minded bigots who pervert the spiritual essence of faith in order to establish their own power base. The Christian church has had its fair share of such people: one need only think of the Crusades and much of what followed them to appreciate that. While the clearly stated essence of Christian faith as taught by Jesus has no place for the imposition of the 'kingdom of God' by militaristic means, that has not deterred those who claim to follow him from making the effort to do just that. If there were first-century Jews who similarly corrupted some central aspects of their own faith, that should hardly be a cause for surprise. What is more unusual would be the fact that later rabbis were able to leave that behind and rediscover something of the more generous spirit which had always infused their traditional scriptures.

Philosophy

Of the many philosophical schools of the time, Stoicism was probably the most congenial to Paul. One or two of the great Stoics came from Tarsus, and Paul may have remembered something about their teachings from his youth. His style of debate and argument sometimes resembles the way Stoics discussed things, with the frequent use of rhetorical questions, short disconnected statements, imaginary opponents to engender debates, and illustrations drawn from athletics, building, and urban life more generally. Paul occasionally uses terminology that would not be inconsistent with Stoic doctrine, even if it does not overtly support it: for example the description of the cosmic Christ in Colossians 1:16–17, that 'all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (NRSV). There is also the fact that in his speech at Athens, Luke reports that Paul had actually quoted from Aratus (315–240 BC) who was a well-known Stoic poet (Acts 17:28). Some of Paul's letters reflect Stoic terminology, as when he describes morality in terms of what is 'fitting' or 'not fitting' (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:3–4). Such examples highlight Paul's concern to contextualize his message in the world of his day rather than any deep-seated empathy for Stoic beliefs. There are some significant differences between Paul's worldview and Stoicism:

Stoicism was based on philosophical speculation about the nature of the world and its people. Insofar as there was one, the real 'god' of Stoic thinking was abstract human reason. By contrast, Paul's faith was very firmly based on the notion of direct revelation coming from God to humankind, most notably (though not exclusively) through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3–11).

The Stoic 'god' was an ill-defined abstraction, sometimes associated with the whole universe, sometimes with reason, and sometimes even with the element of fire. Seneca, quoting Virgil, could reflect that 'What god we know not, yet a god there dwells' (Letters 41.2), but Paul always regarded God as a personal being

whose most authentic image was to be found in Jesus, in whom ‘all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’ (Colossians 1:19, NRSV).

Stoics found ‘salvation’ in self-sufficiency. They sought to win mastery of themselves so they could live in harmony with nature:

The end of life is to act in conformity with nature, that is, at one with the nature which is in us and with the nature of the universe.… Thus the life according to nature is that virtuous and blessed flow of existence, which is enjoyed only by one who always acts so as to maintain the harmony between the daemon within the individual and the will of the Power that orders the universe.

Diogenes Laertius vii.1.53

Paul’s understanding of salvation and personal fulfilment was quite different from this and was to be found not in dependence on himself but in a mystical identification with Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:20).

Stoicism had no future expectation. It held out no hope for the masses since most people were reckoned to be incapable of reaching any moral maturity and were destined to be destroyed as one cycle of the world’s history followed another, only to be reborn, or reincarnated, again so that the whole cycle could be repeated. Paul’s outlook was quite different, for he believed that the world as it now is would be transformed into a different world order with the future personal intervention of Christ himself (1 Corinthians 15:20–28).

The actual influence of the Stoics on Paul must be reckoned to be minimal,

though knowing how to engage in conversation with the philosophical schools of the day was one of the advantages he gained from his upbringing in Tarsus.

Mystery religions

There are several superficial resemblances between the mystery religions and the Christian faith: both came to Rome from the east, both offered ‘salvation’ to their followers, both used initiation rites and sacramental meals, and both referred to their saviour god as ‘lord’. Undoubtedly, the two often became intertwined as converts from the mysteries entered the church and (naturally enough) used the familiar categories of their mystery beliefs as a vehicle for articulating their new faith. It was probably this tendency that was the cause of much of the trouble in the church at Corinth, about which Paul wrote in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Because of these resemblances between Christianity and the mysteries some scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proposed that what Paul did was to change the simple ethical teaching of Jesus into a mystery religion. This view was rejected by the scholarly community because there is no real evidence in its favour, though it still surfaces occasionally in more popular presentations of Paul. What evidence there is tends to show quite the opposite:

The mysteries were always syncretistic – ready, and even eager, to combine with other faiths. This was something that Christians always rejected, believing that what they knew of Jesus was all they needed.

Much of the evidence that was claimed to show Paul was a mystery adherent is now known to have been either false or misleading. For instance, when the title ‘lord’ was applied to Jesus its roots could be found in the Hebrew scriptures, and the Christian confession of faith, ‘may our Lord come’ (recorded in 1 Corinthians 16:22 in its Aramaic form, Maranatha) shows that the very earliest church in Jerusalem, the only one to speak Aramaic, must have given Jesus that title long before Paul came on the scene.

What always impressed the Greco-Roman world was not the similarity of

Christianity to other religions, but its difference from them. The accusation most often made against Christians was of atheism, because they would not admit even the possibility that other gods might exist.

No doubt Paul knew of the mystery religions and their resemblances to Christianity. They told of deities coming into the world in the guise of humans; of salvation as ‘dying’ to the old life; of a god giving immortal life; and of the saviour god being called ‘lord’. Paul always aimed to be ‘all things to all people’ (1 Corinthians 9:22) and may have used such language intentionally. But, as with Stoicism, it is more likely that he used it unconsciously as he shows no detailed knowledge of the mystery religions, and makes no clear reference to any of their ceremonies.

Theatre

Reference has already been made to the likelihood that Paul's 'tent-making' was based not in the wider marketplace, but specifically in the world of the theatre, and it is clear that this not only gave him opportunities to share his faith but also influenced his language and even his own self-understanding as a leader and an apostle. It is not hard to find theatrical imagery in his letters and it is especially prominent in 1 and 2 Corinthians. In the very first chapter of 1 Corinthians he describes the Christian's vocation in terms of being 'fools' for Christ (1:18–25). The Greek theatre had clear lines of differentiation between various characters, and the fool was one of the most recognizable. There was the dozy or befuddled fool, with an elementary style of speaking (1 Corinthians 1:21; 2:1–5; 3:1; 2 Corinthians 10:10; 11:6), the deformed fool whose physical appearance was embarrassing to look at (1 Corinthians 2:3; 4:10–13; 2 Corinthians 12:7), and the shameful fool who was an object of derision at the hands of the rich and powerful, but who Paul identified as his brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1–27; 2 Corinthians 11:7–15). It seems that Paul intentionally identified with this fool tradition in the theatre – to such an extent that he could describe himself as 'sentenced to death' (the regular fate of the fool on stage) and 'a spectacle' (Greek theatron) to be mocked by an audience (1 Corinthians 4:9–10) as a consequence of his association with the outcasts of society. These statements are such an accurate description of one of the standard genres of Greek theatre that Paul's familiarity with it – and in some detail – is beyond any reasonable doubt. He can even use a theatrical image to contrast his present knowledge of Christ with the full revelation he expects for the future, with his reference to the obscured view possible through a first-century mirror (made of polished metal) and seeing an actor 'face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12 – the word literally means 'unmasked', a reference to the use of masks in Greek theatre).

The theatre had close connections to the athletic games, and they could almost be described as two sides of the same coin. Indeed, it is likely that the trade skills Paul employed in the theatre would also be highly valued in the games. He certainly uses imagery from the Greek games in describing the Christian life.

The life of faith can be compared to a boxing match as well as a race (1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Philippians 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:7) with prizes for the winners (1 Thessalonians 2:19; 2 Timothy 2:5), and can easily be disrupted by others (Galatians 5:7), though it is not just about individual achievement: the Christian life is more like a team sport and it is important that everyone on the team pulls together to achieve victory (Philippians 1:27–30; 4:3). In reflecting on his own spiritual aspirations, Paul acknowledges the need for perseverance in the race in order to win the prize and says this is the epitome of spiritual maturity (Philippians 3:12–16). A sporting metaphor even helps him to explain the relationship of Gentile believers to the covenant promises of God made in the past to the Jewish people (Romans 11:11).

The theatre and the games played a significant part in Greek and Roman culture. Spectacle and performance were everywhere, while the games were more sporadic with the Isthmian Games taking place every second year in Corinth, a city with which Paul was especially familiar, though many cities around the Roman empire had their own local equivalent. The extent to which Paul was immersed in this culture, and used its imagery in his exposition of Christian faith, is a striking demonstration of the serious thought that he applied to the contextualization of the gospel so as to ensure that its essence could most easily be understood in very diverse cultural environments, something that he embraced as a conscious strategy of being ‘all things to all people’ (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Emperor

Jesus had been crucified for daring to challenge the basis of civic society, namely the idea that peace could be established by violence rather than through justice based on the love and generosity of God. Paul continued this theme, and in the process challenged the power of the emperor even though he was himself a Roman citizen. Once he had encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, it was inevitable that he would do so, for it was imperial justice that had crucified him – a form of justice that Paul now saw to be morally and spiritually bankrupt. This imperial ideology was straightforward: devotion to the emperor meant (among other things) commitment to a militaristic way of operating which, when the troops were victorious, would lead to peace (the pax Romana). Paul subverted this by advocating devotion to Jesus that (among other things) meant a commitment to non-violence that would lead to the establishment of a peaceful world based on the divine values of justice and generosity. Every title that he subsequently applied to Jesus was regularly claimed for the emperor as a divine being worthy of worship. When Christians refused to offer devotion to the emperor, they were not making a disconnected religious statement, they were in effect challenging the very basis on which the empire operated.

These five worlds all influenced Paul's thinking and teaching. But he was far more than merely the natural product of his cultural environment. His primary self-understanding sprang from his faith relationship to Jesus Christ and the consciousness of having found new direction on the Damascus road was always dominant in his thinking.

Blasphemy and persecution

One of the most cherished beliefs of Judaism, and one that Paul no doubt shared, was that God would soon intervene in history to rescue the chosen people of Israel from domination by foreign invaders. A popular expectation was that at this time God would re-establish them as one of the great nations of the world, the Messiah would arrive in dramatic fashion, march on Jerusalem with his followers, enter the temple and drive the Romans from the land. The gospels show Jesus fulfilling all this and more, though not along the lines of the traditional expectation. Far from being royal, he was of obscure origins (Luke 1–2; John 1:46), with no army and an obvious contempt for physical violence (Matthew 5:38–42). Though his entry into the temple (Mark 11:1–19) could be understood in terms of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, it heralded not victory over the Romans but humiliation and death at their hands. Prior to his Damascus road experience, Paul felt an intense contempt for this crucified ‘Messiah’ and despised even more the activities of the followers of this pseudo-Christ who were soon claiming that after his degrading execution he had risen from the dead and God had recognized him as the true Messiah by giving him a place of high honour (Acts 2:22–24). Paul might conceivably have had some respect for Jesus himself, for he had been an ethical teacher and said many things with which other rabbis could agree. But his followers were ignorant and uneducated and had nothing at all to commend them (Acts 4:13). What right had they to tell the religious leaders of the day that they had been mistaken, and had done nothing to prevent the death of God’s own Son?

When Stephen dared to say in public that the days of the temple and its traditional religious practices were over, Paul and other religious leaders knew that the time had come for action (Acts 7:2–53). It was no longer acceptable to dismiss these followers of ‘the Way’, as they called themselves, as if they were amiable eccentrics, for they were beginning to pose a threat to the whole religious system. It was this fear that led to Stephen being stoned to death by a Jerusalem mob, while Paul himself stood by guarding their coats (Acts 7:54–8:1). This is the point at which Paul first appears in Acts, but as the narrative unfolds it becomes obvious that he was more than just an innocent bystander.

When he saw that the Christians were beginning to move out of Jerusalem to other places he realized that, far from having solved the problem, the way Stephen and others were being persecuted was only helping the Christian cause to spread to other parts of the Roman empire more remote from Jerusalem, and where if it took hold it would be correspondingly more difficult to restrict or control.

One of the places where the Christians were congregating was Damascus, an independent city within the Nabatean kingdom whose ruler was Aretas IV (9 BC–AD 40), though he had no direct authority over Damascus itself (2 Corinthians 11:32–33). This was not the first time that Damascus had served as a haven for religious refugees from Judea. According to the Zadokite Fragments (documents from a Jewish sect loosely connected with the Essenes) a large number of Jews had fled there just before 130 BC. Since these people had been able to live independently of the authorities in Jerusalem, no doubt the early Christians thought they could do the same. In addition, the faith communities formed by these earlier migrants might be expected to provide an ideal audience who would be interested in hearing the Christian claims that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. Without Paul's astute mind, they might have got away with it. But he remembered that at an earlier time in the nation's history the Romans had given the high priest in Jerusalem the right to have Jewish criminals extradited from other parts of the empire (1 Maccabees 15:15–24) and so he went to the high priest to ask for a letter that would authorize him to pursue the Christians to Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and sentence (Acts 9:1–2). It was while doing so that Paul had the experience that changed the course of the rest of his life.

The Damascus road

This experience is described three times in the book of Acts, which shows just how important it was – not only in Paul's life but in the entire history of the early church. In Acts 9:3–19 there is Luke's summary account of what happened, then 22:6–16 presents a personal account given by Paul when defending himself before a Jewish mob in Jerusalem and finally in 26:9–23 there is yet another account given by Paul, this time in his defence before Herod Agrippa II. The three accounts report the incident from different angles and include different details, suggesting that Luke used them to build up a composite picture by exploring the different nuances of the experience that would be specially relevant to the concerns of the different circumstances depicted in his narrative. There are three main differences in points of detail in the accounts of Paul's conversion.

In Acts 9:7 Paul's companions heard the voice of the risen Christ but saw no person though they may have seen the bright light. In 22:9 Paul says they 'saw the light, but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.' What they heard was presumably a sound, but not an intelligible voice. The account in chapter 26 does not refer to the companions either seeing or hearing.

In Acts 9:4 and 22:7 the only person mentioned as falling to the ground is Paul, the central figure in the drama, though this need not exclude the possibility that the others fell to the ground, as in 26:14.

In Acts 9:6 and 22:10 Paul is told to proceed to Damascus, where he will be instructed what to do, whereas in 26:16 his commission to be an apostle is given at the time of the vision. As he reflected on it later, Paul generally identified the entire experience as the occasion of his call, and in Galatians 1:11–12 seems to imply that the actual content of his message was given to him on the Damascus

road.

These distinctions are not of great importance and can easily be explained by reference to the different purpose of the narrative in each case. Indeed the fact that these variations in emphasis have been preserved by Luke instils greater confidence in his abilities as a credible historian. If he had invented the story he would have been more likely either to have told it only once, or to have made sure that each account was identical with the others in form and language. But in all essential points, the three accounts tell the same story. Paul was travelling along the road to Damascus intent on wiping out the Christians there, when ‘a light from heaven, brighter than the sun’ (26:13, NRSV) shone down on him, and he was challenged by a voice asking, ‘Why do you persecute me?’ (9:4; 22:7; 26:14). Paul’s life was to take a radical about-turn, as he was presented with the possibility of understanding the world in a different way than he had ever imagined. His inherited assumptions were not only challenged, but shown to be false, as he realized that what was happening was, in his own words, ‘a revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Galatians 1:12, NRSV). The one whom Paul had so despised, and whose followers he was bent on punishing, was standing before him, thereby revealing his identity as Messiah and inviting Paul to follow him. Though the narratives are unclear as to the precise moment of Paul’s conversion, they leave no doubt that he became a new person as a result of what happened both on the roadside and subsequently in Damascus itself. His conversion was not from being non-religious to becoming religious – nor was it from one religion to another, since Christianity as a faith separate from Judaism did not yet exist. It was, rather, a conversion of his existing faith perspective: the Pharisee who opposed all that he thought the Christians represented now became a Pharisee who followed Jesus.

Paul’s conversion did not totally spring from nowhere. No doubt he already knew something about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth – indeed, on the basis of what he later wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:16 some have concluded that he may have been personally acquainted with Jesus during his lifetime. That seems unlikely, but what is certain is that he must have taken a considerable interest in the interpretation being placed on the scriptures by Hellenist Jewish followers of Jesus like Stephen. By depicting him as a bystander watching the

coats at the stoning of Stephen, Luke indicates that even at that time Paul had a hesitating sympathy with what was being said. Either way, there can be little doubt that such thinking had an enormous and profound influence on his own life, for in many respects the later teaching of Paul on the place of the Law in the Christian life was a natural extension of the teaching of those Hellenist Jews who were Christians before him. Though Paul's letters show him to have been mostly concerned about the Law as a source of morality, with little interest in its ritual and ceremonial aspects, much of what he later said about the temporary and passing nature of the Law bore a striking similarity to Stephen's arguments about the Law and the temple (Galatians 3:1–25).

When Paul arrived in Damascus he was unable to see, and was overwhelmed by it all for three days during which he neither ate nor drank. But when Ananias, a Christian living in Damascus, went to visit Paul his sight was restored, and he was baptized and introduced to the Christians in the city (Acts 9:10–19; 22:12–16). Like Peter at the household of Cornelius, Paul discovered that within the community of the church he would find acceptance among people who on any other ground would have been abhorrent to him. In many ways his experience was even more radical than that of Peter, for the people who welcomed him so generously were the very ones whom he had been intent on hounding to death. In the light of that, it is hardly surprising that when he later wrote to advise the Galatian Christians who were struggling with the consequences of ethnic diversity, he should have emphasized his conviction that people of different social and religious backgrounds could come together only through living a shared commitment to Jesus (Galatians 3:28). It was this burning conviction that later inspired Paul to carry the Christian message not only to the cities of Palestine – places like Damascus itself, Antioch, and even Jerusalem – but also to the furthest corners of the world as it was known to him. In doing so, he displayed an amazing vitality, and through his many letters he has provided an invaluable series of snapshots of what it was like to be a Christian in the wider Roman world of the first century. It was not all easy going, even for an apostle, and Paul's long journeys must have been physically exhausting and highly dangerous. But Paul was undaunted, for from the time of his conversion he was quite convinced that he was not alone in his endeavours, but the Christ whom he had encountered on the Damascus road was living within him and empowering him for this work. He repeatedly insists that the reality of that mystical experience was the fundamental source and motivation of all his work. Writing

towards the end of his life, he put it like this: ‘I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Philippians 3:8, RSV).

Paul’s references to his achievements in Judaism show him to have been a fanatical believer and activist, and the same level of commitment and energy was redirected into serving Christ. Paul did not forget his original purpose in going to Damascus, which had been to visit the Jewish synagogues of the city, and his arrival was no doubt expected. But his message was not what they anticipated for instead of denouncing the Christian faith he proclaimed it and made known his new allegiance to Jesus the Messiah (Acts 9:20–25). After that, Galatians 1:17 mentions a brief visit to a place that Paul refers to as ‘Arabia’ (probably an area near Damascus) before he returned to Damascus for three years. Though Luke never mentions it, this is not inconsistent with the narrative of Acts, where it is stated that he remained in Damascus for ‘many days’ (9:23). The trip to ‘Arabia’ may have taken the form of a retreat to process what had happened to him, though it is just as likely that he went there to share his new faith with anyone who would listen. Either way, Paul soon had to leave the vicinity of Damascus as he had stirred up opposition from both religious and civil authorities. His friends secretly let him down over the city wall in a basket (2 Corinthians 11:32; Acts 9:23–25).

What Paul did next

At this point Paul paid a visit to Jerusalem, probably the one described in Galatians 1:18–24. Not surprisingly, his arrival struck terror into the disciples there until Barnabas, one of the leaders of the church, told them of Paul's conversion and witness in Damascus (Acts 9:26–30). After this Paul went out and shared his new message with such boldness in Jerusalem itself that the apostles sent him to Caesarea for his own safety, and from there he returned to his original home in Tarsus. Paul later explained that his main motive for visiting Jerusalem at this time had been to meet Peter, with whom he stayed for fifteen days. He also met James, the brother of Jesus, though he did not meet many other Christians and most churches in the area only knew of him by reputation (Galatians 1:18–24). He then spent the next eleven years in Cilicia and Syria, probably still unknown to many of the original believers in Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

Paul's movements between his conversion and the Council of Jerusalem.

Though the Christians in Jerusalem might justifiably have forgotten Paul, Barnabas did not, and when he found himself becoming involved in the work of the church in Antioch, in the Roman province of Syria, he sent for Paul to come back from Tarsus to help (Acts 11:19–26). Paul and Barnabas had been working together for about a year in the church at Antioch when a prophet named Agabus arrived from Jerusalem and declared to the church that a great famine was coming which would adversely affect the well-being of the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27–30). The largely Gentile church in Antioch decided to send aid to their fellow believers, and delegated Barnabas and Paul to take the relief fund in person. Luke's narrative places this visit to Jerusalem in AD 43, when the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem begun by Herod Agrippa I in AD 42 was still continuing. It was probably this visit that Paul referred to in Galatians 2:2, where the 'revelation' of which he speaks was presumably the prophetic message of Agabus about the famine. Paul added the further information that on this visit he only saw the church leaders in private, which would be easy to understand if there was persecution going on at the time.

The order of events after Paul's conversion just described is derived from a combination of information from Acts with statements made by Paul himself in Galatians:

Paul's conversion (Acts 9:3–19; 22:6–16; 26:9–18; Galatians 1:11–17)

a brief stay in Damascus (Acts 9:19b)

a visit to 'Arabia' (Galatians 1:17)

work in Damascus for something like three years (Galatians 1:17; possibly Acts 9:20–22)

Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (Acts 9:26–30; Galatians 1:18–24)

Paul’s stay in Tarsus (Acts 9:30; 11:25; Galatians 1:21)

Barnabas joins the Christian movement among the Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:20–24)

Paul joins Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 11:25–26)

Paul and Barnabas visit Jerusalem with famine relief for the church there, fourteen years after Paul’s conversion (Acts 11:29–30; 12:25; Galatians 2:1–10).

Dealing with Jerusalem

Paul's own account of these events makes it clear that this meeting with the leaders of the Jerusalem church was crucial for the development of his own ministry, for at this time the original apostles indicated their willingness to recognize his mission to the Gentiles as a valid extension of the Christian message (Galatians 2:1–10). This was an important issue for the early church. Some Jews, mostly those living in the Dispersion and Pharisees of the more progressive school of Hillel, had shown considerable missionary zeal in winning converts to Judaism. But their converts were required to obey the traditional law in its entirety, ritual as well as moral. Though it was possible to join in Jewish worship as 'God-fearers' without taking upon themselves the whole burden of the Jewish Law (like Cornelius), a central requirement for those who sought full admission to the Jewish faith community was the rite of male circumcision. The church leaders in Jerusalem, who were all practising Jews and regarded themselves as a reforming movement within Judaism rather than a separate faith, naturally took it for granted that any Gentiles who wished to become Christians would first become Jews, by being circumcised. The experience of Peter with Cornelius had previously convinced them that it was possible for a Gentile to be converted and receive the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:1–11:18), but when Paul and Barnabas inaugurated a mission among the Gentiles in Antioch it raised different questions altogether. For one thing, Cornelius had been an adherent of Judaism, and though he was a 'God-fearer' and not a full proselyte his case was therefore different from that of converts with no previous connections to the Jewish faith. In addition, there does not appear to have been a widespread Christian movement connected with Cornelius at the time of Peter's visit, whereas in Antioch a church of Gentile believers was formed. The Jerusalem leaders were willing to recognize that Paul and Barnabas were engaged in a commendable enterprise, but they refused to accept any responsibility for it.

Dates and places

This understanding of the various texts is just one possible way of understanding the various time references provided by Acts on the one hand and by Paul himself on the other. There has been considerable debate as to whether Paul's own account of his contact with the Jerusalem apostles can be reconciled with Luke's narrative in Acts. From Galatians 2:1–10 it is obvious that Paul regarded the visit which he describes there as absolutely crucial for his entire ministry to the Gentiles. In trying to correlate this with Acts, it is natural to look for an account of a visit that had the same far-reaching significance for Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, and the occasion which most obviously appears to meet this requirement is the 'Council of Jerusalem' visit when Paul and Barnabas, sent to Jerusalem as official delegates from the church in Antioch, met in a formal session with the other church leaders to try and decide once and for all what should be required of Gentile Christians in relation to the Jewish Law (Acts 15:1–29). While the traditional view has therefore been to regard Acts 15:1–29 as an account of the same meeting as Paul describes in Galatians 2:1–10, this identification raises two major problems:

According to Acts 15:1–29, this visit resulted in a thorough and wide-ranging discussion of the very issues with which Paul was dealing when he sent Galatians, namely the question of the status of Gentile Christians, whether they should be expected or required to observe the Torah, and if so whether they needed to keep the Law in its entirety or only certain aspects of it. Acts 15:23–29 records the details of a compromise worked out by the Council, with the agreement of Paul and Barnabas, and which was apparently accepted by all concerned as an appropriate basis for the admission of Gentiles to the Christian church. Yet in Galatians 2:1–10 Paul makes no reference to any such agreement having been made, even though it would have been crucial in this defence of his own position. There (2:6) he confidently declares that the Jerusalem church leaders 'added nothing to me' (RSV), which is a very different story from that in Acts 15, where they insisted that he should stick to the same rules as everyone

else, and which he evidently agreed to do.

If Acts 15:1–29 refers to the same events as Galatians 2:1–10, there is a further historical discrepancy between the account in Acts and that in Galatians. For between Paul's conversion andthe Council visit Acts records two earlier visits to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26; 11:30; 12:25), while Paul mentions only one (Galatians 1:18). It is virtually unimaginable that Paul could have been mistaken, for the whole of his argument in Galatians depends for its validity on the assumption that he was describing every single meeting he had ever had with the Jerusalem leaders. To have omitted one of them – especially such a significant one – would have undermined everything he was arguing for. It would therefore be necessary to suppose that Luke must have been mistaken in his account in Acts, either by describing the same incident twice, or out of sheer ignorance of what really happened.

Besides these difficulties in correlating Acts 15:1–29 with Galatians 2:1–10, several smaller points of detail can also be interpreted to suggest the alternative possibility that these two accounts may not be describing the same meeting:

In Acts 15:2, Paul and Barnabas were 'appointed' by the church at Antioch to go to Jerusalem and meet with 'the apostles and elders'. In Galatians, on the other hand, Paul uses different language, saying that he 'went up by revelation' (Galatians 2:2,RSV).

The conference of Acts 15:1–29 seems to have been a semi-public and formal event with the apostles and elders and 'the whole church' involved in it (15:22). In Galatians, however, Paul makes a particular point of mentioning that the meeting was held in private (Galatians 2:2); and only James, Cephas (Peter), and John are mentioned by name in connection with it (2:9).

The outcome of the meeting of Acts 15:1–29 was a decision (‘the Apostolic Decree’) allowing Gentile converts to remain uncircumcised, while also insisting that they ought to observe certain aspects of Jewish tradition that would make it easier for Jewish believers to meet with them (Acts 15:28–29). The outcome of the Galatians meeting, on the other hand, was a mutual recognition of Paul and Barnabas as apostles to the Gentiles and of Peter and the others as apostles to the Jews (Galatians 2:9–10), with no mention at all of the relational complexities between the two groups within the church.

In view of these differences between Acts 15:1–29 and Galatians 2:1–10, it seems better to suppose that Galatians 2:1–10 records the same events as Acts 11:29–30 and 12:25. There are at least four factors in favour of this:

The claim that Paul went to Jerusalem ‘by revelation’ (Galatians 2:2) would be a natural way to refer to the prophecy of the famine by Agabus, which was the immediate occasion of the Jerusalem visit of Acts 11:28.

Galatians 2:2 suggests that the meeting with the church leaders was a private one and Acts dates the famine either during, or shortly after, the persecution of Herod Agrippa I, which could easily explain the need for such secrecy. The absence of James and other Christian leaders from the meeting mentioned in Act 12:17, which took place during this visit, is also consistent with this reconstruction.

It is possible to translate Galatians 2:10 as follows: ‘Only they asked us to go on remembering the poor, and in fact I had made a special point of doing this very thing.’ On this understanding, Paul could have been making a direct allusion to some such visit as is recorded in Acts 11:25, when he took famine relief to the Jerusalem Christians.

Since Paul obviously intended to recount every visit he made to Jerusalem from the time of his conversion to the time he was writing, and if Acts 11:29–30 refers to the same event as Galatians 2:1–10, that provides a simple explanation for his silence regarding the terms of the Apostolic Decree: the Apostolic Council had not yet taken place.

On this interpretation, Paul's letter to the Galatians must have been written sometime between the events of Acts 12:25 and Acts 15:1–29, though this in turn raises other important questions about the date of Galatians which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

When Peter later visited Antioch he at first followed the custom favoured by Paul and ate with the Gentile converts. Peter himself had previously had a meal in the home of Cornelius, but it would not normally have been an acceptable practice for an orthodox Jewish believer. When more conservative Christians arrived in Antioch from Judea, Peter was easily persuaded to abandon the practice, and Barnabas joined him. This inconsistency led to a confrontation with Paul, and the evident tensions running through this episode provide the first example of something that was to trouble Paul throughout his ministry. Although he knew that his calling was to Gentiles, Paul could never forget his own people. He was proud of having been born into the Jewish faith community and constantly went out of his way to affirm the advantages it had given him while at the same time believing that the religious leaders had been mistaken in not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. He felt passionately about it all but never quite came to terms with the extent to which the issue of Gentiles becoming Christians would divide the church. As Paul began to fulfil his calling by inviting Gentiles to follow Jesus without ever considering the long history of the faith tradition into which they would enter, it was inevitable that the rumblings of discord first heard in Antioch would become a major storm.

Paul and the earliest church

It is easy to get the impression that only two people really mattered in the early church: Jesus and Paul. Taken together, the gospels and the writings of Paul account for something like three-quarters of the entire New Testament and though there are occasional mentions of Peter, James, and other lesser characters such as Silas or Timothy, they are all overshadowed by the emphasis on Paul. His dominance in Acts is no doubt connected with the purpose for which Luke compiled that account, as a selective story of the beginnings of Christianity – so focused and selective, in fact, that if we had only Acts we might imagine that Paul was the first Christian to take the gospel to Rome, whereas his own letter to that church demonstrates that a thriving Christian community existed there long before he ever visited Italy (Romans 1:6–7). Paul's work, though of fundamental importance, was clearly complementary to that of many other figures in the early church whose names and exploits have not been recorded in any detail. But is 'complementary' the most appropriate way to describe Paul's relationships with Peter and other early Christian leaders – or was he instead establishing a novel form of Christianity, different from the original church at Jerusalem not only in character, but in belief as well? That suggestion was first put forward in the middle of the nineteenth century by the members of the 'Tübingen School' in Germany, inspired by the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860). They believed they could detect a vast difference between Paul's type of Christianity and the sort of churches founded by more self-consciously Jewish Christians such as Peter or James of Jerusalem. They understood the whole of the first generation of Christianity as a conflict between these rival forms of Christian belief, a conflict that was resolved only with the emergence of the 'catholic' church in the second century. This was not a new idea, and even in the second century the anonymous authors of the Clementine Homilies and Clementine Recognitions had suggested that there were irreconcilable differences between Paul and the original apostles.

Is this a fair picture, either of Paul or of the others? Was he really independent of the original base of the church in Jerusalem? Or did that become a convenient conclusion for twentieth-century scholars to reach because, on the whole, they

found his more open-minded view of the gospel more congenial, or even – as has been suggested – because their anti-Semitic bias disposed them to marginalize Jewish elements in the early church while their Protestant bias naturally inclined them to reject anything that could be made to resemble Roman Catholicism? There is a good deal of truth in such suggestions, as we shall see in later chapters when we return to these themes. Here, it is appropriate to point out that when the New Testament is examined more closely, whether in Paul's own writings or in the stories of Acts, it soon becomes clear that Paul was more conscious of his own Jewish origins and background than a majority of early twentieth-century scholars were prepared to allow. At a number of points Paul went out of his way to demonstrate continuity between his own Gentile churches on the one hand, and the earliest Jewish churches on the other, and never himself abandoned his Jewish faith, though he wished to supplement it with belief in Jesus as Messiah.

The Hebrew scriptures

It is significant that whenever Paul defined Christian faith he consistently did so in relation to Judaism. In Galatians, for example, the argument of which is also closely followed in Romans, the interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures is a crucial element in what he says. In one way that is understandable, for the Galatian churches were being infiltrated by people claiming that before being admitted to the church Gentile believers in Jesus first needed to become Jews. Paul found that argument unacceptable for, he claimed, a living relationship to God through Jesus depended on simple trust (Galatians 2:15). Yet instead of merely stating that, he still held the Old Testament in sufficiently high regard that he felt it was important to demonstrate that the position he was taking was fully in accord with the teaching of these ancient scriptures. He argued that long before the Torah had even come into existence, Israel's ancestor Abraham had trusted God's promises of justice and generosity. Therefore, anyone who now wished to be a member of God's covenant people need only to follow the example of Abraham, and trust God, for the Law was in some ways an addition to the original simplicity of the relationship between Abraham and God (Galatians 3:6–9).

Today's readers can find the argument of Galatians somewhat convoluted and unnecessarily complicated, but that is precisely because of Paul's insistence on taking the Old Testament seriously. Though he disagreed with the argument that in order to please God a Gentile person needed to accept the Jewish Law and customs, nevertheless he accepted without question the more fundamental premise that in order to please God a person must become a part of the covenant nation which traced its historical origins back to the call of Abraham. Far from dismissing those who were saying that Gentiles must become Jews in order to be Christians, he was agreeing with them. But while others supposed that obedience to the Law was the hallmark of the real Jew, Paul redefined 'Jewishness' to lay all the emphasis instead on continuity with Abraham. For him, to be a child of God was to be a member of Abraham's family and to join that, faith was the only necessary qualification (Galatians 3:6–25; 4:21–31). This line of argument was continued in Romans, where he added the comment that 'the real Jew is the

person who is a Jew on the inside… and this is the work of God's Spirit, not of the written Law' (2:29). In saying this Paul stood in the same tradition as Stephen, and the Old Testament prophets before him, who had consistently tried to restore the covenant faith to what they believed its original meaning to have been, namely that obedience to God's will, and not ethnicity, was its core value. No matter how he redefined the Old Testament faith in relation to the Judaism of his own day, Paul always felt it was important that Christians, whatever their ethnic origins, understand their own spirituality within the context of the continuing actions of God in history that had begun with Abraham and would reach final fulfilment at some unspecified future time (Galatians 3:29). Unlike some of his later admirers Paul never suggested that the Old Testament was irrelevant for the Christian, but instead viewed even Gentile Christians as part of a great line of faith stemming from Abraham himself and insisted that this was what qualified them to be a part of 'the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16).

Jews and Gentiles

One of the most difficult passages in the whole of Paul's writings makes all this even more explicit (Romans 9–11). There is no consensus on how this section of Romans relates to its context, with some commentators arguing that this is the key that unlocks the door to the whole of the rest of the letter while others believe it was an afterthought, representing Paul's uncertain speculations on the fate of the Jewish people, rather than any kind of carefully developed thinking on the subject. Whichever view is correct, what Paul actually says is clear enough: that in his understanding, to be born a Jew still carried a distinct advantage. The whole 'people of God' (ancient Israel and their descendants, together with the Gentile Christians) can be compared to an olive tree, whose roots extend deep into the Hebrew scriptures, and onto which Gentile Christians have been grafted like a new branch (Romans 11:13–24). It may seem for now as if some of the original (Jewish) branches have been broken off, but this is only temporary and they will be restored. Indeed, the presence of Gentiles will serve to encourage the further obedience of those who belonged to it by birth (Romans 11:11, 25–26). Paul concludes discussion of the subject on that somewhat cryptic note, and there are many challenges in understanding precisely what he meant. But however he thought this was all to be accomplished, Paul clearly believed that the Jews had an important part to play in the whole history of salvation, something which in itself suggests that he was by no means anti-Jewish.

Paul's missionary practice reveals the same emphasis, for whenever he went to a new city in some previously unvisited part of the Roman world he always went first to the synagogue (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1–2). Of course, there would be good tactical reasons for doing so: since he was concerned to declare that Jesus was the Messiah, it was only natural that he should speak first to people who had some notion of who and what the Messiah might be. The fact that they had rather different expectations from Paul himself usually became clear fairly quickly, and he was often thrown out of the synagogues. But that did not stop him following the practice, for in addition to its practical advantages he also had a strong theological reason for operating this way because while the gospel might be 'God's power to save all who believe', it was for the Jews first, and then the

Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Regardless of that theological priority, Paul believed his calling was to take the gospel to Gentiles rather than Jews and according to what he says in Galatians, this special commission was recognized by the Jewish church leaders in Jerusalem: Paul would go to Gentiles, they to Jews (2:7–9). In practice, this was not a hard and fast rule as Paul often met and spoke with Jews while Peter in particular was to become involved in missionary activity among Gentiles. But as a rough arrangement, it was apparently a satisfactory division of labour. Its origin could well have been in social and economic considerations rather than purely theological ones, for Paul was a single person and therefore had more freedom to engage in long and arduous journeys than the Palestinian apostles, who had dependent families and needed regular financial support from the churches. Paul, by contrast, probably had inherited wealth from his family, and could easily stay long enough in a place to take casual employment to support himself as the need arose (Acts 18:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:8).

Authority

Paul evidently had regular and not unfriendly contacts with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. But was it more than that? Was Paul, as some have argued, almost under their control? Do his letters not conceal the truth, by making him appear much more independent than he actually was? This suggestion gains some support from the fact that towards the end of his third missionary tour Paul put a great deal of effort into taking a collection among the Gentile Christians of Greece and Asia Minor, which was to be for the benefit of the church in Judea (1 Corinthians 16:1–7). Hellenistic Jews throughout the empire sent an annual tax to the authorities in Jerusalem to support the temple and its services there: does this collection imply that the Jerusalem church exercised a similar central control over the whole Christian movement?

It seems unlikely, for Romans 15:26–27 describes the collection in the following terms: '… the churches in Macedonia and Achaia have freely decided to give an offering to help the poor among God's people in Jerusalem. That decision was their own…' Paul added that 'as a matter of fact, they have an obligation to help them. Since the Jews shared their spiritual blessings with the Gentiles, the Gentiles ought to use their material blessings to help the Jews.' In other words, conscious of his own deep indebtedness to the Jewish Christian church, Paul had organized this collection as a thank-offering and spontaneous expression of love for the Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:8–14). That would not necessarily prevent some of the Christians in Jerusalem seeing it in a different light, of course, and it has been suggested that they may have regarded it as the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies of Isaiah 60:11 in which 'the wealth of the nations' would be brought to Jerusalem by Gentile messengers 'bowing down to show their respect'. If that were the case, however, we might expect them to have received Paul and his Gentile Christian companions with open arms. In fact it is not at all clear what happened to the collection when it finally arrived in Jerusalem, and it has been plausibly suggested that the Christians there actually refused to accept it. It is certainly notable that when Paul was subsequently arrested in the temple it was not the Christians who sprang to his defence, but a Roman officer (Acts 21:27–40). Perhaps the more conservative Christians there

had not gone so far as to lead him into a trap, but at least they were not sorry to see the back of him. The same cannot, however, be said of Paul’s attitude to them and the very fact that he had made the effort to return to Jerusalem at this time shows his deep and lasting indebtedness to the leaders of the first Christian church.

Jesus

This indebtedness also comes out in the way Paul's letters often display knowledge of and familiarity with the teachings of Jesus himself. One of their most intriguing features is the complete absence from them of any direct references to the life and teaching of Jesus. At one time it was fashionable to suggest that Paul had no time for Jesus, and that his own brand of Christianity was based instead on Greek and Roman concepts. But there are just enough references to Jesus to make that proposition unlikely. Paul occasionally says that he is quoting from or referring to 'words of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:10; 9:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:15), but there are many other places where his own advice is so close to the teaching of Jesus as it is known from the gospels that he must have had it in mind when writing. An example would be in the practical advice given to the church in Rome, where some key themes from the gospels recur:

Love your enemies	Matthew 5:43–48	Romans 12:14–21
Love God and your neighbour	Mark 12:29–31	Romans 13:8–10
'Clean' and 'unclean' foods	Mark 7:14–23	Romans 14:14
Responsibility to state authorities	Mark 12:13–17	Romans 13:1–7

Paul's knowledge of the words and deeds of Jesus had not come from personal contact with Jesus, but from those who had been Jesus' first disciples – especially, perhaps, from Peter with whom Paul spent two full weeks after his conversion (Galatians 1:18). Paul must have known a great deal more about Jesus' teaching than can be implied from his letters, but there are probably good reasons for his apparent silence on the matter. For one thing, his letters were all occasional writings rather than considered and carefully worked out accounts of his entire belief system. In addition, his readers would be likely to have known a lot about the life and teaching of Jesus already, for it is reasonable to suppose that such information would have been included in the initial communication of the Christian message. It is certainly improbable that Paul could have spoken meaningfully about Jesus in the empire beyond Palestine without at the same time giving them some explanation about who Jesus was. To be able to do that with conviction, he needed the co-operation and friendship of the original Jewish disciples.

CHAPTER 14

PAUL: TRAVELS AND LETTERS

Shortly after they returned from Jerusalem to Antioch Paul and Barnabas entered a new phase of their work as the Gentile church there, following guidance from its prophets, blessed the two friends and sent them off on their first real missionary expedition (Acts 13:1–3).

From one Antioch to another

On leaving Antioch they headed for Barnabas's homeland, Cyprus, where they had an audience with the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus in the capital Paphos. Luke uses this meeting to introduce one of the central themes of the book of Acts, namely the warm acceptance of Paul's message by representatives of the Roman empire (Acts 13:6–12). Significantly, too, from this point in his narrative Luke abandons the use of the Hebrew name Saul, and exclusively refers to him by his Roman name, Paul. This narrative also introduces another theme in the form of Elymas, or Bar-Jesus, a Hellenistic magician who attempted to thwart Paul's efforts to convince Sergius Paulus of the truth of his message about Jesus. Just as the gospels depict Jesus confronting the dominance of alternative spiritualities, so throughout Acts Paul is faced with the same kind of challenge.

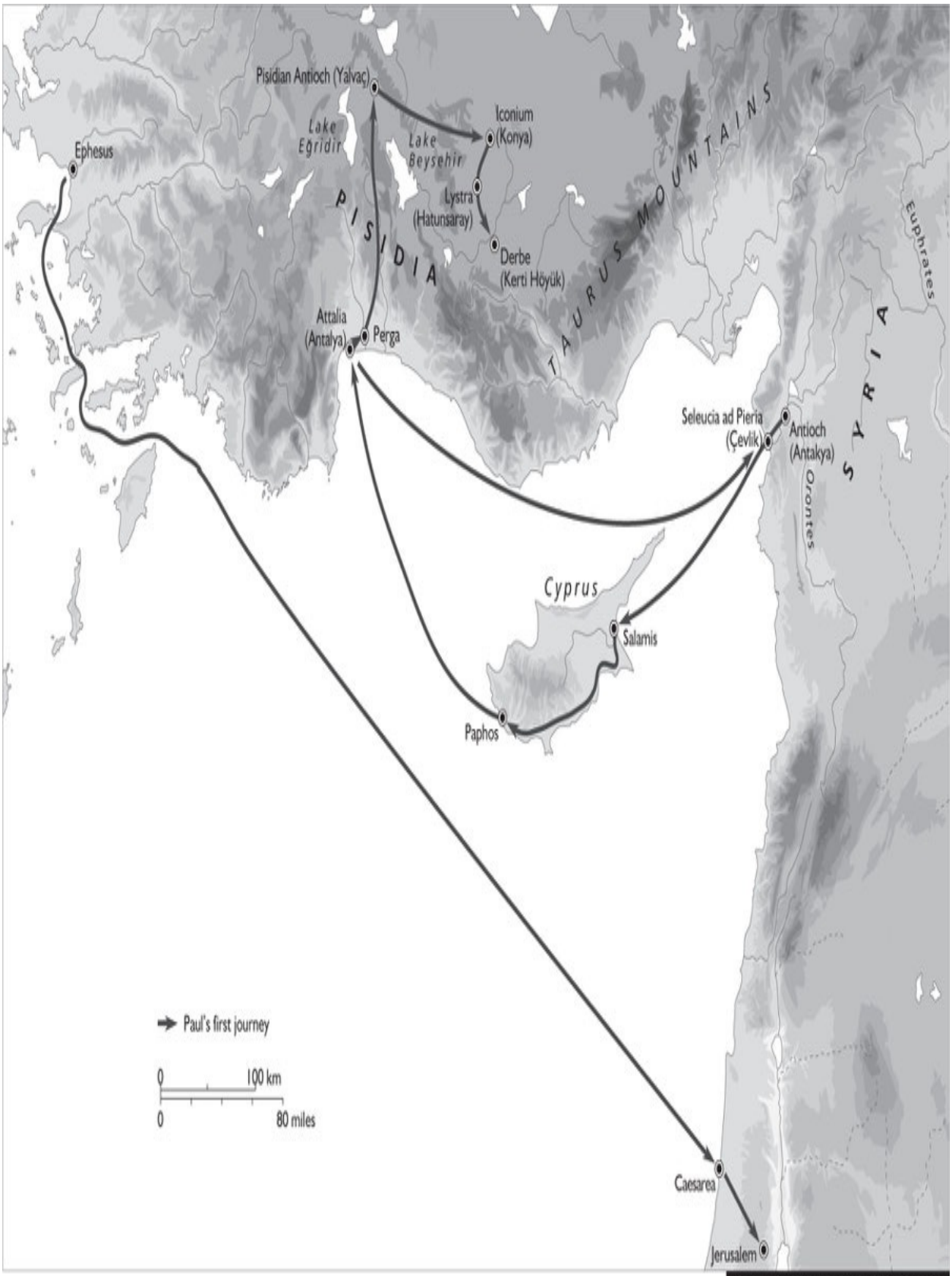
After a promising start Paul and Barnabas left Cyprus and sailed to the south coast of Asia Minor and then crossed the mountains into Pisidia, to another town also called Antioch (Acts 13:13–14). From there they pressed on eastwards to the region of Lycaonia, which was part of the Roman province of Galatia, and after successful missionary work in several towns of that region they returned to Antioch in Syria by roughly the same route, except that they did not revisit Cyprus (Acts 14:21–28). In each town, the apostles began their work by visiting the Jewish synagogue. This was the place where they could easily meet those Gentile 'God-fearers' who would be most open to their message. On their return journey, Paul and Barnabas made a point of revisiting each new community of Christians that had been formed, encouraging them in their faith and helping their leaders to understand what might be required of them (Acts 14:21–23). At some stage during this trip Paul seems to have fallen ill, for in writing to the Galatians he later mentioned a disease which affected his appearance and appears to have damaged his eyesight (Galatians 4:13–15). This recurring condition was possibly a legacy of his childhood in Tarsus, which was surrounded by malarial swamps. He also refers elsewhere to a 'thorn in the flesh', which may well have been the same ailment (2 Corinthians 12:7, KJV).

Gentile churches

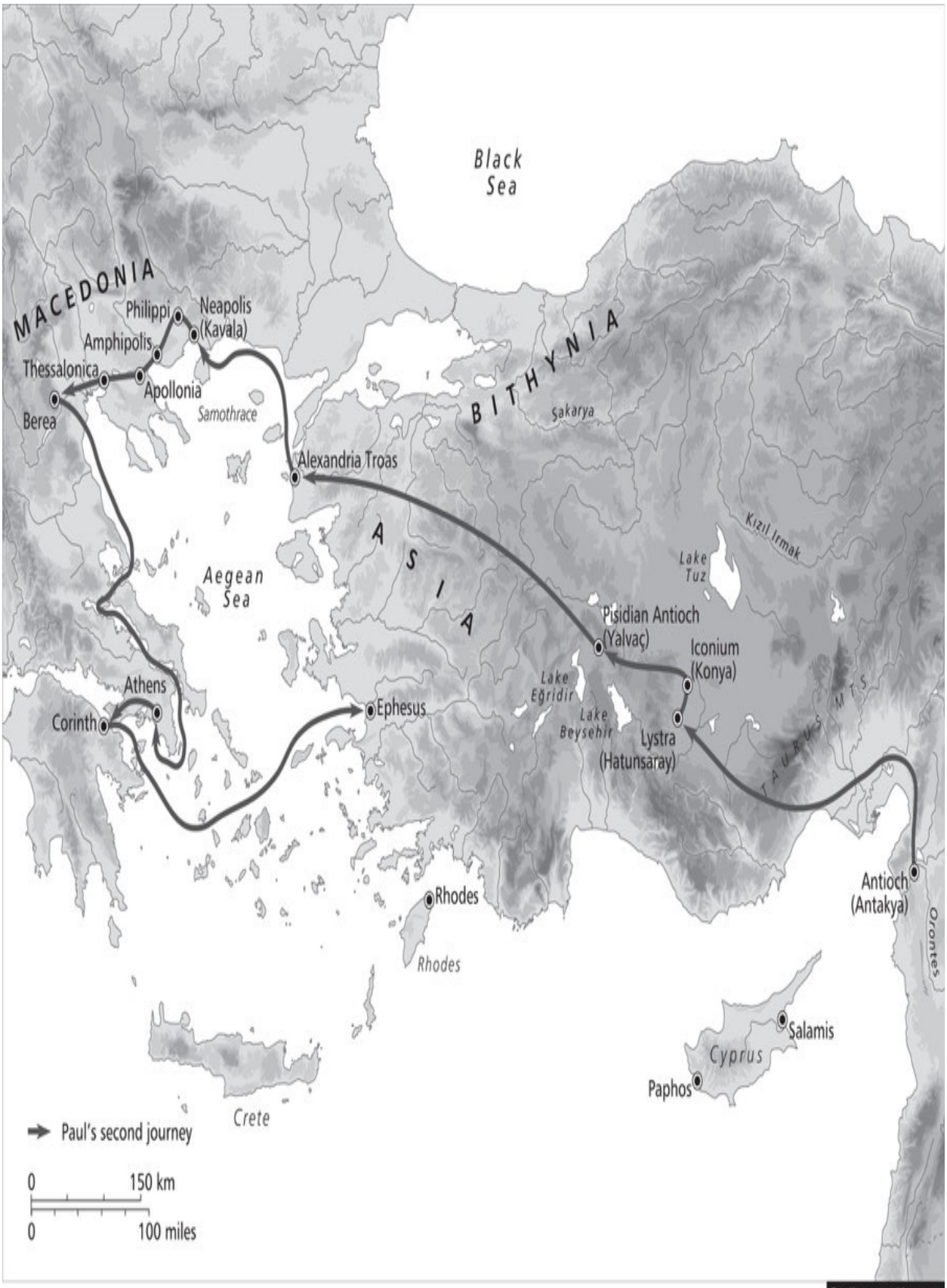
As a result of Paul's visits to these cities many Gentiles came to believe in Jesus. Some were Jewish proselytes and God-fearers but many others had no previous connection with Judaism. Paul began to realize how much potential there was for sharing the gospel with Gentile people, and the significance of his own calling in that respect. His experiences at this time also convinced him that Gentile believers should be admitted to the Christian community on the basis of their faith in Christ, and with no further obligation to be circumcised or observe other customs derived from the Jewish Law. One of the first discoveries Paul made after his own conversion had been that his new understanding of Jesus Christ also established a new relationship with other people, including those whom he might previously have looked down on. In the same way he now found that, though he himself continued in faithful Jewish observance, a shared belief in Jesus enabled him to enjoy a new level of meaningful relationship with Gentiles of all sorts. This was what Paul had come to expect following his experience on the Damascus road, for it had been made clear to him then that he was to play a pivotal role in spreading the Christian message through the wider Roman empire. When he and Barnabas returned to Syrian Antioch, they were welcomed by the church there, who affirmed their strategy of taking the gospel directly to Gentile people, and celebrated their success in evangelizing the inhabitants of southern Asia Minor.

Judaizers

This happy situation did not last for long as emissaries from the Jerusalem church soon arrived in Antioch with a very different attitude. Worse still from Paul's point of view, they also visited the new groups of Christians which he and Barnabas had just established in the course of their first mission trip (Galatians 2:11–14). Their arrival created havoc among these new Christians as they claimed that Paul had delivered to them a deficient account of the Christian message. According to Paul, if Gentiles were willing to accept the claims of Christ over their lives they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live the kind of life that reflected the values of God's kingdom. To more conservative Jewish believers this idea was blasphemous. Their understanding was that God's will had been revealed in the Old Testament, where it was clearly taught that in order to be a part of the community of God's people a person must be circumcised and observe many other regulations. So how could Paul claim that these Gentiles were proper Christians when they had never even considered the full implications of God's ancient revelation? How dare he suggest that an acceptable standard of Christian morality could ever be attained by any means other than careful observance of the standards set out in the Torah? The new converts were thrown into confusion by such teaching. All they knew was that they had accepted the message Paul declared, that their own experience of Christ matched what had happened to Paul on the Damascus road, and that they could expect to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in a way that would be pleasing to God. The majority of them had never been followers of Judaism, and had no idea what was in the Hebrew tradition. Paul had given them no indication that it was necessary for them to find out in order to be acceptable to God but when these new Christians started reading the Old Testament under the guidance of the Judaizers who had now visited their churches, they found themselves faced with a mass of rules and regulations, many of which seemed irrelevant to the reality of life in the average Hellenistic city and which they had no inclination to keep even if it was necessary to do so for salvation. Some decided to make a brave attempt and began by observing the sabbath and possibly certain other traditional festivals as well (Galatians 4:8–11). A number of them even contemplated being circumcised in order to fulfil what seemed to be the requirements of the Old Testament (Galatians 5:2–12). But the great majority simply did not know what to do.



Paul's first missionary journey.



Paul's second journey.

Paul the letter-writer

When Paul wrote letters to the Christians who were under his care, he naturally followed the common style of the day. An ancient letter usually had a more or less set pattern, and Acts 23:26–30 contains a typical example of such a letter in the form of the message sent by Claudias Lysias to Felix at the time when Paul was committed for trial. Paul always adopted the same structure in the letters he wrote to churches and comparison of his letters with other correspondence in the ancient world shows that these were intended to be personal communications rather than formal pronouncements about theology.

An ancient letter always began with the name of the writer, and only then would it name the person to whom it was sent. It was more like the style of an email than of a formal letter in today's world, and Paul followed that pattern very closely.

Then followed the greeting, usually a single word. Paul often expanded this to include the traditional Hebrew greeting (shalom, 'peace') together with a new Christian greeting ('grace' – in Greek, very similar to the normal everyday greeting).

The third part of a Greek letter was a polite expression of thanks for the good health of the person addressed. This was usually expanded by Paul into a general thanksgiving to God for all that was praiseworthy in his readers.

Next followed the main body of the letter. In Paul's letters this was often divided into two parts: doctrinal teaching (sometimes in response to questions raised by

his readers) followed by advice on aspects of the Christian lifestyle.

Personal news and greetings came next. In Paul's case this was more often news of the churches and prominent individuals in them, though occasionally there might be news of Paul himself.

There was often also in Paul's letters a note of exhortation or blessing in his own handwriting, as a guarantee of the genuine and personal nature of the letter.

Finally, ancient letters often ended with a single word of farewell, a feature that Paul almost always expanded into a comprehensive expression of blessing and prayer for his readers.

To describe Paul as a writer of letters can create a false impression of the way he operated. Artists have often depicted Paul sitting at a desk with quill pen in hand and reference books at his side, but the reality was about as different as could be imagined – and a whole lot more interesting, and ultimately more illuminating in relation to Paul's message. For a start, it appears that Paul never actually wrote any of them and the actual physical writing was invariably the work of someone else. This is clear from the way that some letters have a sentence or two added in Paul's own handwriting as a way of validating the authenticity of the rest (Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:17; 1 Corinthians 16:21; Colossians 4:18; Philemon 19), while those who did the writing could also add their own contributions – people like Tertius, who wrote Romans on Paul's behalf, then added a note himself towards the end (16:32). These individuals are often described as Paul's secretaries, though they were not the sort depicted in old movies, writing down word for word what their employer dictated to them. The groups to which these letters were sent mostly consisted of people who were at best semi-literate, perhaps able to write their own name and little else. Paul himself makes it clear that he expected the recipients of his letters would hear them rather than read them (1 Thessalonians 5:26–27; Colossians 4:16), and his intention was that they would have an experience that was as close as possible to

what it would have been like if Paul had actually been there in person, speaking with them. The Roman empire had a form of postal service, but the Christians preferred to send messages like this through their own networks. They were not at this time an officially approved group, and if their communications were intercepted they could potentially be misunderstood and used against them. For similar reasons, when Paul sent letters to his churches not everything that he wished to say was necessarily put in writing. These letters were conveyed by trusted associates, who would be authorised to expand on their contents and answer any questions that might arise. Some letters identify who that was. In the case of Romans it was Phoebe (16:1–2), and no doubt she will have been present when Paul initiated the letter and Tertius wrote it down. Then when she got to Rome she will have followed Paul's intonations and body language so as to give the Christians there as close an experience as possible of hearing the voice of the apostle without him actually being physically present. Given this, the word that best describes Paul's communication process is not so much writing, but performance – performance by Paul himself as if he was speaking directly to his audience, the essence of which was captured by whoever composed the actual letters, which would then be taken to their destination by a friend who would do their best to replicate what they had heard from Paul. Sections of some letters are even presented like the script for a play: for example Romans chapters 6–8, in which different voices ask questions and offer their opinions. One of the challenges in understanding Paul today is that translators have tended to turn what was in effect a theatrical style into a literary style. All the evidence is that Paul was a very emotionally involved speaker, in which nuances of tone and body language were a significant part of the message. Perhaps the nearest thing today would be a TED talk, reduced to writing by a friend and then delivered by another trusted colleague who was able to expand on it and answer questions reliably because she had heard the original delivery and knew what was meant. However this process might be imagined, these letters were certainly delivered to their recipients as oral performance rather than texts to be pored over, and when we read them as religious texts today there is always a danger that we will over-analyse them and think we can discern nuances of expression that were never intended by Paul or noticed by his original audiences. Galatians exemplifies this tendency very well indeed.

This was the point at which news of the situation reached Paul, and he was

infuriated by what he heard. It was not practical for him to visit these new converts again just at that particular time, so in the heat of the moment he decided that he must write them a letter. This was the letter known to us as the epistle to the Galatians.

The Galatian churches

The Galatians have already been mentioned in the discussion of the order of events following Paul's conversion, where it was suggested that this letter is to be dated about AD 48, just before the visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem for the Apostolic Council. If the arguments set out there are correct then Galatians would be Paul's first letter, and probably therefore the first book of the New Testament to be written. But what has been said so far is not the complete story. The mention of people who could be called 'Galatians' would most naturally suggest the Celtic people of that name who lived in the region of Ankara in present-day Turkey, and who gave their name to an ancient kingdom there. But if these are the people referred to, then Acts indicates that Paul did not visit them until his second and third missionary expeditions (Acts 16:6; 18:23), which in turn means he could not have written to them as early as AD 48. It has also been argued that since Paul's teaching in Galatians closely resembles some sections of Romans (and that was certainly written towards the end of his third missionary tour) it would make more sense to suppose that this letter was written to the people of north Galatia at some time between AD 56 and 58. The scholarly consensus favours this later date, and the view that it was as early as AD 48, and therefore the earliest of all Paul's letters, is a minority opinion – though one that has been, and continues to be, held by some eminent scholars.

Sir William Ramsay (1851–1939) was the first scholar of any importance to advocate this understanding. At the beginning of the twentieth century he conducted extensive archaeological investigations in the very areas of Asia Minor of which we are speaking, in the course of which he discovered that the Roman province of Galatia included not only the ancient kingdom of the Galatians in the north of Asia Minor but also the southern region of Lycaonia ('south Galatia'), in which Paul worked during his first missionary expedition and where he had established churches at Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium. This at least eliminates the argument that Paul did not visit a place that could be called 'Galatia' until much later and makes it possible that Galatians could have been written about AD 48 to the churches Paul had visited on his first missionary expedition. The other argument often put forward to support a later date for the

letter (that it is similar to Romans) is weak, and the evidence can be interpreted in more than one way. For there are subtle distinctions between Galatians and Romans, with Romans certainly being a more sophisticated and rounded presentation of what are fundamentally the same arguments. The more detached tone of Romans suggests that it was written at a time and place when Paul was able to set the passion and acrimony of the Galatian situation in a wider context, which might suggest a longer period between them, rather than some immediate connection. There are still many unanswered questions about the date and setting of Galatians, but the conclusion here is that the early dating is capable of answering more questions than a later date (including other issues previously discussed concerning the integration of the accounts of Paul's visits to Jerusalem in Acts), and therefore can plausibly be advocated as the most satisfactory option.

When we come to the letter it is instructive to note how closely it follows the stylistic pattern of the personal letter. It begins with Paul's name, along with a mention of others who were with him at the time ('all those of God's family') and who in some way were associated with the contents of the letter. Then the recipients are named, in this case a group of churches ('the churches of Galatia'), followed by the greeting ('grace… and peace'), expanded into a brief sentence of praise to God (Galatians 1:1–5). One very significant omission is to be noted at this point. Nowhere in Galatians did Paul give thanks for the spiritual condition of his readers. There was nothing to be thankful for: they had not been Christians long enough for Paul to be able to refer to praiseworthy deeds done in the past (as he did, for example, in Philippians 1:3–11), and their condition at the moment of writing certainly gave Paul no cause for thanksgiving.

After that, the main body of the letter follows, divided roughly into a reflective section (1:6–4:31) and a practical description of Christian living from 5:1 to 6:10. No personal news and greetings finish this letter, perhaps because of the haste with which Paul wanted to communicate with them, or because he had no time for such pleasantries with people who had so readily disregarded his teaching. He did however include a final appeal in his own handwriting, mentioning that his letters were much bigger than those of the person who had written the rest of it – an observation which gives added credence to the

suggestion that his malarial fever had damaged his eyesight (Galatians 6:11–17). Paul then concluded with a blessing which was also a prayer for his readers, assuring them that a power greater than their own was ready to their hand: ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen’ (6:18, NRSV). That has covered only the barest outline of the letter. But what was Paul actually saying? Though Galatians is not an especially long and involved letter, it is not always very easy to understand Paul’s meaning. This is partly because the letter was formulated hastily in the middle of a raging controversy, and in such circumstances people do not express themselves in the ordered way they would in calmer moments. But the complexity of his expression also stems partly from the subject matter, for Paul was very much at home in the Jewish scriptures and was able to quote from them with great freedom as he set out to expound the twin principles of liberty and equality within the Christian community.

The letter to the Galatians

This letter falls conveniently into three main sections and deals in turn with what Paul regarded as three false ideas that were being propounded by the Judaizing teachers who had infiltrated the Galatian churches.

Paul and his authority

The first thing the Judaizers had said was that Paul was not a proper apostle because he was not one of the original twelve nor had he been accredited by the original apostles in Jerusalem. Paul's answer was that he needed no authorization from Jerusalem or anywhere else, since he had himself met with the risen Christ on the Damascus road (1:10–2:21). Far from being inferior to the others, he had encountered Jesus face to face, and that placed him in the same situation as James, the Jerusalem leader, who apparently had a similar experience (1 Corinthians 15:7). This was the source of his accreditation as an apostle (Galatians 1:11–12), and though he had visited Jerusalem on several occasions he had never felt it necessary to obtain the permission of the original disciples to carry on his work – nor had they suggested that he needed such permission (1:18–2:10). In fact, quite the opposite was the case, and while Peter and the rest had a calling to take the gospel to Jewish communities, they not only acknowledged Paul's vocation to work with Gentiles but gave their blessing to him and Barnabas for that enterprise (Galatians 2:7–9). Subsequent events at Antioch had proved conclusively that Paul was in no way inferior to Peter (Cephas), who was commonly reckoned to be the greatest of the apostles. When Peter had broken off eating with Gentile Christians to pacify Jewish believers coming from Jerusalem, Paul had no hesitation in opposing him 'to his face' (2:11) – and, Paul implies (and there is no evidence to the contrary), Peter accepted the rebuke delivered to him on that occasion, thereby implicitly recognizing Paul's apostolic authority.

Christians and the Old Testament

After dealing with this attack on his own credentials Paul appealed briefly to the Galatians' own experience before addressing the second piece of false teaching propounded by these Judaizing intruders. What they knew of Christ ought to have shown them that they had received the Holy Spirit (the mark of the true Christian, Romans 8:9) not because they obeyed the Torah but because they had exercised faith in Jesus (Galatians 3:1–5). This then led straight into an attack on another part of their teachings. In the Hebrew scriptures the promise of the messianic kingdom had been given to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:7–8), and this was the basis on which the Judaizers were arguing that anyone who wished to be in the messianic kingdom must become members of Abraham's family by circumcision and continued obedience to the Old Testament Law (Genesis 17:9–14). Paul addressed this contention in three ways by appealing directly to the scriptures.

He pointed out (3:6–14) that the blessings promised to Abraham apply to 'all who believe'. Abraham had faith in God, and this faith was the basis of his acceptance by God (Genesis 12:1–4; see also Hebrews 11:8–12, 17–18). At the same time, 'all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse' (NRSV). Human experience and scripture both proved that in practice it was impossible to be justified in God's sight by keeping the Law, because it was very hard to do that without the moral power to sustain it.

But was not the Law God's highest revelation, surpassing all that had gone before it? No, says Paul: since the Torah came into effect only long after Abraham's time, it could not possibly alter a direct promise made to him by God. The 'inheritance' promised to Abraham could not be obtainable by both Law and promise (3:18). The Law had a rather different purpose in God's plan: firstly, it served to show up sin as a transgression against God's will (3:19; see also Romans 4:15; 5:13). Before the law was given, the only moral guidance that humankind had was the 'law of nature' expressing itself through their own

conscience. But after the Law was given people were able to understand wrongdoing for what it really was, defiance against God's will. Secondly, the Law was given to be a teacher 'until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith' (3:24, NRSV). Paul suggests that as people tried to gain salvation by their own efforts at keeping the Law, they realized that it was an impossible task and so the way was prepared for God's new act of grace in Jesus Christ.

Paul then proceeded to take this argument to its logical conclusion (3:25–4:7). The Law was only effective 'till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made' (3:19, RSV), and since this 'offspring' had come in Jesus that inevitably meant that the era of the Law was ended, and those who had faith in him would be freed from the Law and its demands. Previously they had been slaves to 'the elemental spirits of the universe' (an expression that includes the Law, but is not restricted to it, 4:3, RSV), but now they were children and heirs of the promise made to Abraham (4:4–7).

Freedom and legalism

By placing themselves under the Law and keeping traditional holy days, the Galatians were really trying to undo what God had already done for them in Christ by prioritizing behaviour over commitment. It was back to the works-without-faith way of living that Jesus himself had challenged. Paul was fearful that if they did this, he had wasted his time ministering among them (4:8–11) and by way of explaining why, he went on to deal with another argument put forward by the Judaizing teachers. For they had given 'scriptural' reasons to show that even Gentile Christians ought to observe the Torah and to be circumcised, reasons which Paul counteracted in three ways:

He returned again to the status of the Law (4:21–5:1) in relation to the story of Abraham, this time through the incident when Sarah (a free woman) expelled Hagar the slave (Genesis 21:8–14). This, he said, was an allegory of the superior

position of the good news in Christ over against what might be perceived as the legalism of the Torah.

Paul also answered the queries about circumcision (5:2–12), making it clear that in his view circumcision was of no value either way to Christians: it simply made no difference whether Christians were circumcised or not. Their standing before God must depend not on such external signs but on ‘faith working through love’ (5:6, NRSV). In the case of people like the Galatians, he believed that to submit to circumcision would actually be a denial of what Christ had done for them (5:2). In any case being circumcised also obliged people to observe the whole of the Jewish Law (5:3) – the very thing that Paul had just rejected and which experience showed to be impossible anyway. The freedom brought by Christ was clearly incompatible with the ‘yoke of slavery’ (5:1) associated with circumcision and the Law.

After this, Paul dealt with the question of Christian behaviour (5:13–6:10). One thing that marked Jews off from other people in the ancient world was their relatively high moral standards, which resulted from their close adherence to the Law. The Judaizers who visited Galatia had argued that if Christians discarded the Law they would have no guide for their conduct and would be indistinguishable from other people around them. This was an important question, and one that was not easy to answer. Paul had told the Galatian Christians that the Holy Spirit would empower them to live as Jesus lived. This is the kind of thing he indicates in 2:20 with talk of Christ living within him. But would it work? Paul dealt with the accusations of the Judaizers on this score by making four important statements. Firstly (5:13–15), ‘freedom’ in Christ does not mean a freedom for Christians to do as they like but freedom to be empowered by the Spirit, whose purpose is to reproduce in Christians a Christ-like character consistent with the teaching of Jesus on peace accomplished through justice, love, and generosity. Secondly (5:16–26), though the Christian gospel does not prescribe particular actions, ‘those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires’ (5:24, NRSV). That means the Christian’s life will be characterized by ‘the fruit of the Spirit’. The demands of Christ are far more radical than the external imposition of ethical rules: the Christian’s whole personality should be transformed, as attitudes and behaviour

are transformed from within. This was the same lesson that Jesus himself had taught (‘A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’, Matthew 7:18, RSV). Thirdly (6:1–6), Christians should beware of judging others. They ought to recognize that they themselves have no moral strength to do what is right apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. Insofar as they have a duty, it is to ‘fulfil the law of Christ’ by bearing ‘one another’s burdens’ (6:2), which is something very different from the observance of a restricted collection of externally imposed rules and regulations. Fourthly (6:7–10), Paul sums up his advice: in order to reap the harvest of eternal life, his readers must not cultivate the ‘flesh’ (their own self-gratification), but the ‘Spirit’ (their new life given by Jesus).

Finally (6:11–18), Paul makes one last appeal to his readers, which includes two further points against his opponents, followed up by two balancing statements of his own belief and practice. Despite their high pretensions, his opponents were in fact spiritually bankrupt (6:12), wanting to ‘make a good showing in the flesh’ (NRSV), the very thing that Paul had denounced in the previous section of his argument (6:8). They are also inconsistent, even with their own starting points, for though they emphasize the outward sign of circumcision they are not willing to accept the spiritual discipline involved in keeping the Law.

The Apostolic Council

Galatians presumably reflects the way Paul argued at the Council of Jerusalem in AD 49 and, according to Acts, even James – probably the most conservative of the Jerusalem leaders – had to agree with the substance of what he said (Acts 15:6–21). The Jerusalem apostles accepted that there was no great theological principle involved, though there was still the pressing practical problem of how Jews and Gentiles could meet together and share food at the same table.

In order to make this possible the Jerusalem leaders suggested that Gentile converts should avoid four activities that were particularly offensive to Jewish believers: 'abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality' (Acts 15:19–21 (author's translation), 28–29). Commentators have generally assumed that the first three concern food. But it is more likely that all four of these prohibitions relate more broadly to Roman attitudes that were incompatible with the values of the gospel. Idolatry is self-explanatory, and was widely condemned in Jewish circles. 'Blood' was everywhere, and if we are correct in characterizing imperial strategy as peace-through-violence over against Jesus' teaching on peace-through-justice, then this prohibition becomes especially significant. 'What is strangled' is a good guess at the meaning of a somewhat unusual Greek word (pniktos), so unusual that there are only twenty occurrences in all Greek literature prior to the third century, where it typically means 'something smothered'. This could refer to the asphyxiation of young animals for food, but in the context is more likely to refer to infanticide, the regular practice of killing or abandoning unwanted infants. On this understanding, this agreement was not concerned with traditional Jewish foibles over food but was stating core Christian values in opposition to the accepted culture of the empire, dominated as it was by violence, sexual exploitation, idolatry in many forms (including emperor worship), and child abuse. If this is correct it also helps to explain why Paul, when later faced with specific questions relating to food, made no reference to this Apostolic Decree but argued from the basic principles involved in the matter (1 Corinthians 8:1–13; 10:19–11:1, Romans 14:1–23).

Paul was driven by the conviction that what had been revealed to him by the risen Christ was of supreme authority, and so he concluded by affirming that the only real cause of boasting before God must be that the Christian is crucified to the world, through the cross of Christ. Talk of a cross in the first century meant only one thing: death, and that is what Paul had in mind when he wrote of Christians sharing in the cross of Christ (Galatians 2:20). He was not urging them to be martyrs, but was indicating in a more mystical, inner sense that Christians should die to themselves by giving up their claims to final jurisdiction over their own lives and destiny, and applying the gospel and its values to every aspect of life. This ‘new creation’ was the only thing of any value in the sight of God, and constituted the sole qualifying mark of membership in ‘the Israel of God’ (Galatians 6:14–16). Paul himself may be criticized for being a traitor to Judaism, but so far as he was concerned he bore the mark of true spirituality before God, ‘the marks of Jesus’ (6:17). A single slogan neatly summarizes it all: ‘in Christ, it is not circumcision or uncircumcision that counts, but the power of a new birth’ (Galatians 6:15, author’s translation).

Back to Galatia

After his crucial meeting with the leaders of the Jerusalem church, Paul returned to his work with a new enthusiasm. In the course of his earlier travels he had come to realize just how attractive the Christian message could be to the populations of the great urban centres of Asia Minor, and he could now see the potential for moving even further afield to invite others to follow Jesus. Barnabas chose not to join him on this second expedition because Paul was unwilling to give a second chance to John Mark (Barnabas's cousin) who had apparently let them down during their earlier trip (Acts 15:36–40). But Paul found a keen helper in Silas, one of the messengers who had been sent to Antioch to explain the decisions of the Jerusalem Council to the church there (Acts 15:30–33). In the course of their journeying, they were joined by two others: Timothy, who met them at Lystra (Acts 16:1–3) and Luke who met them at Troas (Acts 16:10–12).

Paul first wanted to revisit some of the communities which he had founded in south Galatia during his first expedition from Antioch. He had been hoping to see them ever since he heard of the consternation created by the interference of the Judaizers and during this further visit he no doubt explained that, though as Christians they were not required to fulfil all the detailed requirements of the Torah, it was important that they should endorse the fundamental principles of the gospel that had been agreed upon in Jerusalem. Not only would that create an environment in which Christians from a Jewish background could feel free to meet with them (Acts 16:4), but it would also demonstrate the distinctiveness of Christian values to the wider empire. After this Paul and Silas went on with Timothy, who had joined them in Lystra, through Phrygia and Galatia (perhaps this time north Galatia). Paul had intended going into the Roman province of Asia, which was the area round Ephesus in the west of Asia Minor, and also into Bithynia, the province to the north which adjoined the Black Sea (Acts 16:6–7). Neither of these aspirations worked out, and indeed Luke specifically comments that they were 'forbidden by the Holy Spirit', though he gives no indication as to how this instruction might have been communicated. Paul and his companions therefore went on into Troas in the part of Asia Minor nearest to Europe.

During the night Paul had a dream of a Macedonian person appealing for help, and recognized this as a divine invitation to cross the Aegean Sea and into Europe (Acts 16:9–10). In the context of the Acts narrative Paul's entry into Europe forms a pivotal focus in Luke's purpose of documenting the spread of the gospel from Palestinian beginnings to the centre of the empire in Rome itself. In terms of the expansion of the church, however, it was certainly not the first time that Christian missionaries had entered Europe, for at a later date Paul wrote to a large and flourishing church at Rome, which had not been founded by his own efforts.

Philippi

The first town the missionaries visited was Philippi (Acts 16:12). It had been founded by Philip II of Macedon in 356 BC, but the Romans designated it as a colony and divided it into smallholdings that were distributed to settlers who came predominantly from Italy, many of whom were retired army officers. A Roman colony was in effect a miniature version of Rome itself, with the same legal structure and governed by two military officers (duumviri) appointed directly from Rome. The city obviously had a substantial Roman population, but Paul still followed his earlier custom of first going to the Jewish community which was so small that they had no synagogue building but met at ‘a place of prayer’ by the riverside.

Converts

Among Paul's hearers at this place of prayer was Lydia, who was the first one to become a Christian in Philippi. If Paul had any lingering doubts about the wisdom of abandoning his earlier plans and moving instead into Europe, they must have disappeared with the conversion of this woman, for she was a native of Thyatira, a city located in the very area of Asia Minor where Paul had originally been intending to go. She may well have been the one who first took the Christian message to her home town, where there was soon a large Christian community (Revelation 2:18–29). In any event, her discovery of Jesus as the Messiah brought about a radical transformation in her life, for though she was a woman of some importance her own home was soon opened to Paul and his friends and became the headquarters of their activity in the city. Once again Paul was learning that the gospel created a unity of friendship between men and women that could defy all normal social and racial barriers.

One thing that happened at Philippi provides a good illustration of some of the reasons why the Christian faith also began to arouse so much antagonism in many parts of the empire. While going about his evangelistic work Paul was continually pestered by a slave girl who, by means of some kind of clairvoyance exercised in a trance state, had brought a large income to her minders. Like Jesus before him, Paul had a keenly developed sense of both social and spiritual injustice and could not pass by the opportunity to help this person find freedom – from the exploitation of those who owned her as well as the spirit of divination that was believed to possess her. Predictably, this action was not well received and her owners were so angry that they accused Paul and Silas of creating a public disturbance by recommending customs that were unlawful for Roman citizens (Acts 16:16–21).

Imprisonment

Accusing someone of public nuisance could always be guaranteed to arouse a Roman official to some sort of action, and the town authorities responded swiftly. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison where they spent the night singing praises to God. During the night an earthquake broke open the prison doors and, though they could have escaped, they chose to remain, along with the rest of the prisoners. The local jailer was ready to take his own life, assuming that in such circumstances all his prisoners would get out, and when he found they were still there he was amazed, and challenged by the realization that these prisoners were at peace with themselves in a way that he was not. On learning of the secret of their power, he became a Christian himself, along with his entire household. After the conversion of his jailer, Paul was determined to leave prison. In fact, he ought never to have been there in the first place, for he was a Roman citizen. He therefore claimed his rights as a citizen, and demanded an apology from the embarrassed city authorities before leaving the city of Philippi altogether (Acts 16:22–40).

Luke stayed behind in Philippi to help nurture the new Christians in their faith. They were drawn from all levels of society and included a prominent local trader, a spiritual healer and astrologer, as well as the city jailer and his family. Paul's reputation travelled fast, and at one of the next places they visited he and his friends Silas and Timothy were described as people 'who have turned the world upside down' (Acts 17:6, RSV). The next towns he visited were Thessalonica and Beroea. There were significant synagogues in each city, and many converts were made. In both places, however, there was also serious opposition stirred up from within the Jewish community, opposition which seems to have been directed specifically at Paul himself as a former Pharisee, since Silas and Timothy were able to stay on there when Paul went ahead to Athens (Acts 17:14–15).

Athens

Athens had for centuries prided itself on being the intellectual centre of the ancient world. In Paul's day it was no longer a significant political force but it was still a city of learning to which young Romans went to study philosophy or to be initiated into one of the many mystery religions that found a home there. Communicating his message in Athens was bound to require a different approach than the other places Paul had visited up to this point. People there had no Jewish or biblical background, and therefore to introduce Jesus as the Messiah would have meant little or nothing to them. With ethnic Jews and Gentile proselytes or God-fearers Paul could begin from the scriptures and point out how the promises made there had been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At Athens he was conscious of his own relative ignorance regarding the nature of the Hellenistic spiritual search, and so his mission began not by speaking but by observing what was going on and listening to the debates that took place on a daily basis. The Athenians loved to have a good debate, and the city leaders believed that taking an interest in philosophy and spirituality was part of their job. It was only a matter of time before he was invited to go and address the court of the Areopagus.

In speaking with them Paul began from the Greek view of God as creator, benefactor, and invisible presence within the universe, talking of the universal human search for God who is 'not far from each one of us' and referring in the process to statements made by the Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus (Acts 17:27). He also mentioned the many shrines and altars that were located all around the city. Most Greek cities had an abundance of small statues and icons placed at strategic locations to provide an opportunity for people to pay homage to the deities as they went about their daily business. The status of these gods and goddesses had been thrown into some doubt as a result of the thinking of previous generations of philosophers, and some of the language used by Paul may have been alluding to arguments that had been used to question this form of traditional devotion since the days of Xenophanes in the sixth century BC. Paul, however, was not interested in contradicting the traditional spirituality of his hearers, and instead used it as an opportunity to present his own message. Since

he had observed an altar ‘to the unknown god’, he identified Jesus with this unknown deity and proceeded to explain the gospel from this perspective. Paul had a strong belief in a creation-centred spirituality intuitively shared by all people by virtue of their common humanity, quite independently of their formal religious traditions (Romans 1:18–2:10), and this was his starting point in Athens. Of course, he also spoke of the distinctive aspects of Christian belief, including the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself.

This message had a mixed reception and Athens was not one of the cities where Paul immediately established a thriving Christian community. Nevertheless, this narrative plays a key role in the book of Acts, for while other stories can give the impression of a somewhat triumphalist progress of the gospel, this one reminds its readers that even Paul’s mission work was not guaranteed instant success. It also – and more importantly so far as Luke was concerned – provided an example of how the Christian message was to be contextualized in cultures where the salvation-history of the Old Testament was unknown. In doing so, he shows Paul affirming the spiritual starting points of his audience and being prepared to journey alongside them while at the same time challenging them to see things from the new perspective of belief in Jesus – and in the process drawing on resources that were already in the biblical tradition, particularly the creation-centred theology of the early chapters of Genesis and its developments in later Judaism.

Corinth

After this Paul pressed on to Corinth, one of the oldest cities in the world that had been reconstructed as a Roman colony in 44 BC. Corinth had a unique location at the narrowest point in the mainland of Greece, and therefore with easy access to the Aegean Sea on the east and the Adriatic Sea to the west. Though the Romans had established extensive seagoing trade routes, and navigational methods were well advanced, ancient sailors still preferred to stay close to the coastline whenever they could and Corinth took advantage of this to establish itself as one of the foremost centres of trade and transportation. The city was an important transit point at which ships could pass from the Aegean to the Adriatic without navigating the dangerous southern tip of Greece. Because of its strategic position roughly midway between the eastern end of the Mediterranean and Italy, there was always a constant stream of traffic passing through. Though there were plans to build a canal from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic even in New Testament times, it was many centuries later before the project was carried through. At the time of Paul's visit the city had two separate harbours on each of its coasts – Lechaeum and Cenchreae – and between the two was an intricate construction a bit like a conveyor belt, along which vast numbers of slaves would haul ships from one harbour to the other.

Corinth had become a major interchange, not only for commerce but also for the many cultures of the empire. People of different nationalities and spiritual opinions mingled naturally on the streets of Corinth, and the city was a vibrant microcosm of the whole of the empire. As a staging post for sailors it was also home to an enormous number of prostitutes and its name became a by-word for sexual experimentation of every imaginable kind. Paul clearly recognized the strategic importance of Corinth, for he stayed there for eighteen months (Acts 18:11), and even after that he took more interest in the nurture of this church than he normally did with other communities that he founded. At first Paul followed his usual pattern of going to the synagogue, but was soon forced to leave. He then moved next door to the home of one of his new converts, Titius Justus, and that became the base for his mission to the city. Many citizens became Christians at this time, including Crispus, one of the synagogue leaders

(Acts 18:8), and a large and influential Christian community was established in the city. The synagogue authorities eventually launched a concerted effort to have him chased out of town in a move that coincided with the arrival of a new Roman magistrate, the proconsul Gallio. He was the brother of the well-known poet and philosopher, Seneca. Paul was charged with promoting forms of worship that infringed the law (Acts 18:13), that is the Jewish Law, which failed to engage Gallio because he had clearly done nothing wrong in relation to Roman law. The major significance of this episode is that it is the only incident in Paul's life that can be given a fairly precise date. Gallio's period of office in Corinth is recorded in a copy of a letter sent from the emperor and preserved on a stone inscription, which shows that he must have been proconsul either in AD 51–52 or AD 52–53.

A letter to the church in Thessalonica

Early in the course of Paul's stay in Corinth, Silas, and Timothy (who had remained behind in Thessalonica) arrived with news of the Christians there. Their report was most encouraging, for though it had been little more than six months since their conversion to Christ, the example of their changed lifestyle had made such an impact in the surrounding area that others had also been attracted to Christian faith. However, there were also some issues that required Paul's advice. The people in the synagogue had stirred up opposition, including physical violence, and several matters were leading to tensions within the Christian community itself. Questions needed to be answered about sexual relationships, about the nature of leadership, and about the fate of Christians who had died. 1 Thessalonians was written to encourage them and to offer guidance on these particular problems, and the opening sentence identifies its originators as 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy' so presumably it contained the combined wisdom of all three.

After the usual introduction, the letter began by commending the Thessalonian Christians for their faithfulness to the message that Paul and Silas had shared with them. The outcome was that a strong church had been established, and by the example of the changed lives of the believers the claims of the gospel had been commended within their wider social context. In Galatia it had been suggested that Paul's message of freedom from the Law would lead to low moral standards, whereas the exact opposite seems to have happened here, as the whole of Macedonia and Achaia saw the difference that the Christian faith made to the way of life of these believers (1 Thessalonians 1:2–10). The way Paul describes all this raises some questions about the exact nature of the mission in Thessalonica, for he refers to his converts as having 'turned to God from idols' (1:9, NRSV), which would imply they were predominantly Gentiles, whereas Acts 17:1–9 only mentions converts from within the synagogue community. But later sections of this letter cover apocalyptic concerns that would be more likely to have been raised by converts from within Judaism, so perhaps the reality is that Paul's mission appealed to a broad cross-section of the Thessalonian population, including those of Jewish ancestry as well as Gentiles previously

associated with the synagogue, and those with no such connection.

Paul and his strategy

The next major section of the letter reflects on Paul's mission strategy when he and his friends first arrived in the city. This passage is especially noteworthy as it is the only place where Paul gives an account of what he thought he was doing in a context that is not responding to criticism or some other problem that had arisen in the churches. Readers are reminded that the apostles had been careful not to advertise themselves, but to draw attention to the essentials of their message. Though they had been sent out with the personal authority of the risen Christ, and with the backing of the earliest churches, their attitude was consciously modelled on the love and generosity of which Jesus had spoken, characterized as a gentle approach 'like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children… determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves' (2:7–8, NRSV). The intentional use of feminine imagery here is significant in view of the widely held caricature of Paul as a misogynist and male chauvinist (the Greek word often translated as 'nurse' here more accurately means 'a breast-feeding mother'). Paul and his associates felt they had been well rewarded for their efforts, for the Thessalonians had responded to the message and had recognized its life-changing potential not as a merely human message but as a word from God (2:13). This knowledge, together with the news conveyed by Silas and Timothy, proved to be a great encouragement to Paul as he worked in difficult conditions in Corinth (2:17–3:8). Nevertheless, there was something lacking in their faith (3:10), and so Paul set out to try to give good advice on the various matters that Timothy had reported to him.

How should Christians behave?

The Judaizers were right when they suggested that the biggest challenge for Gentile converts would be in relation to personal behaviour. Paul's expectation had always been that, by relying on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, converts would align their lifestyle with the core values of the gospel, and in a majority of cases that was what had happened among the Thessalonians. But it was still necessary to reinforce what he had no doubt told them when he founded their church (4:1–8), and in doing so Paul naturally reflected on what he had written earlier in Galatians on the same matter, advising them not to see freedom as an invitation to exploit others, but rather an opportunity to serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13). The Thessalonians had learned this lesson well and are commended for their concern not only for one another but for all the Christians throughout Macedonia (1 Thessalonians 4:9–10). This was something that could never be over-emphasized. In a world in which the established order was rapidly changing, and in which people were frantically grasping at whatever spirituality came their way, one of the most important things the church could do was to display the love and generosity of Christ (4:9–12). Jesus himself had taught that this would be a key evidence of authentic discipleship (John 13:35), and the advice is here repeated and reinforced by Paul and his colleagues.

What about the future?

One thing above all appears to have been troubling the church at Thessalonica. They understood the relationship that should exist among the members of their community, but what about those Christians who had died shortly after Paul's departure from the city? Perhaps Paul's teaching on the parousia had been misunderstood, as some of these converts seem to have had the idea that no Christians would die at all before Christ returned in glory. Paul corrected this by providing a clear statement spelling out his beliefs on the matter, and emphasizing that though Christ's presence was already operative in the church through the work of the Spirit, Jesus would one day come back openly and in glory (4:13–18). Meanwhile, the Thessalonian Christians should not worry unduly about loved ones who had died: 'since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep' (4:14, RSV). Alongside his obvious confidence, Paul appreciated the potential pitfalls in emphasizing what God would do in the future, and so he went on to remind the Thessalonian Christians that their belief in the future return of Jesus was no excuse for inactivity in the present. Though some people would not be prepared for 'the day of the Lord', Christians should be. Their business was not to try and calculate 'the times and the seasons' (5:1, NRSV) but to 'encourage one another and build up each other' (5:11, NRSV).

Living the Christian life

Finally, this letter offers advice on a number of topics by way of summarizing most of what had been said before (5:12–21):

In the church, Christians should:

- respect those who laboured among them, that is the leaders

- be at peace among themselves (a repetition and reinforcement of what he had said in 4:9–12)

- encourage one another in their faith in Christ (5:14).

In their everyday life, Christians should always:

- return good for evil (5:15), one of the most characteristic marks of the Christian (see also Matthew 5:44)

- ‘rejoice always’ (5:16).

In their relationship to God, Christians must:

- live in an attitude of prayer (5:17)

- allow the Holy Spirit to direct their lives (5:19–20).

The letter ends with blessings and greetings, reminding them of the importance that its contents be read to the whole community, and reaffirming that the secret of successful Christian living was to be found in the work of the risen Jesus continuing to operate through the lives of his followers (5:24–28).

Another letter

It seems that the Thessalonian Christians soon forgot some of this advice, especially in relation to future expectations and the state of Christians who died, and the expected parousia of Jesus became the focus for yet more apocalyptic speculation. In some ways it seemed that these questions had arisen out of statements made in the letter that Paul had already sent them, and so more explanation was necessary in the form of a second letter. It is suggested by some scholars that 2 Thessalonians may actually have been written first, and it is certainly possible to understand the questions about eschatology in 1 Thessalonians as having developed on the basis of what is said in 2 Thessalonians, rather than the other way round. It has also been pointed out that 2 Thessalonians seems to be addressing a circumstance in which persecution was an immediate concern, whereas 1 Thessalonians implies it was in the past, though of course persecution was relatively common so they do not both need to be referring to the same occasion. Either way, the two are obviously related and like 1 Thessalonians, this one identifies its authors as ‘Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy’ (1:1, NRSV), though this time Paul added a note in his own distinctive handwriting so presumably it was one of the others who compiled most of it (3:17).

The author

There may be room for debate in relation to the order of the letters, though more significantly some have proposed that the two letters are so individually distinctive that if Paul wrote one of them he cannot have written the other. Like many questions about who wrote what in the New Testament, this one is almost certainly exaggerated and to some extent reflects an avoidance of the actual way in which these letters were composed. In the case of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, they both specifically name three individuals as being involved, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that any alleged variations in their forms of expression might well be consequential on which one of the three was responsible for the specific form of words. But since in this case some particular differences have been detected between the two it is worth reviewing the evidence for this.

Eschatology

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, the coming of Jesus is evidently described as an imminent event and Christians are warned not to be taken by surprise when it comes, whereas 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 lists a sequence of events that will take place before the parousia and this, it is argued, removes the element of immediacy from it because it would hardly be possible to hold both views at once. This argument is not as impressive as it seems:

Though ‘signs of the end’ are not listed in 1 Thessalonians, they are implied in 5:1 with a mention of ‘the times and seasons when these things will happen’ (author’s translation). This statement seems to imply that the readers already knew about such matters, and when Paul proceeds to warn them not to be taken by surprise it is precisely because they, of all people, should be able to recognize when Jesus is about to return.

The two letters deal with different issues. In the first place, Paul and his friends had been asked a personal question about the fate of Christians who died, and the answer to that was given on an appropriately personal level. But the question behind 2 Thessalonians is quite different, and concerns people who were saying that the ‘day of the Lord’ was here already. This was a quite different kind of argument, and it demanded a different sort of answer, not this time from a personal perspective, but on a broader cosmic level.

Tone

2 Thessalonians is said to be more formal than 1 Thessalonians. Here again, the alleged differences are nothing like as great as they can appear to be. The writer of 2 Thessalonians still has a deep concern for his readers and if, as we have suggested, 1 Thessalonians had been wilfully misunderstood by some people, it is hardly surprising that Paul should have been sterner with them the second time. Exactly the same change of tone can be traced in the later correspondence to the church at Corinth, and for similar reasons.

Comparisons

This is almost the opposite argument: not that the two letters are different, but that they are too much alike. Some similar words and phrases are used in both, and this has been interpreted as an indication that 2 Thessalonians is just a rewritten version of 1 Thessalonians – rewritten, presumably, by someone else later than the time of Paul. Here again, this is a very slender basis on which to reach such a conclusion:

Why would anyone wish to produce such a rewritten version of one of Paul's letters? The only plausible possibility would be to try and contradict, or correct, what was later seen as an erroneous idea in 1 Thessalonians. If the eschatological perspective of 1 and 2 Thessalonians was different, then that could perhaps provide an explanation. But we have already seen that this is not the case.

In any case, why should an author not repeat him or herself? Even today, someone engaged in a long correspondence will often refer to previous letters in the process of compiling later ones, and there is no reason to suppose that ancient writers could not have done the same. We certainly know that was the practice among other Greek letter-writers. Especially when giving personal advice in a continuing situation, it is often necessary to say the same things more than once.

In any case, the actual verbal similarities between 1 and 2 Thessalonians are not very extensive. At least two-thirds of 2 Thessalonians is quite new, and much of the rest consists of standardized terminology which was part of the stock-in-trade of the letter-writer, the stylistic equivalents of our 'Dear sir', or 'Cordially yours'.

All these problems are more apparent than real. Distinctions of this kind can be made to look significant when viewed as objects of detached analysis, but such variations and repetitions make good sense when placed in a wider social context, and are the sort of things that happen every day in real life, especially in dealing with situations such as these letters presuppose.

The Message

This second, shorter letter to the Thessalonians clarifies three main points.

The church and its enemies

From what is said in 2 Thessalonians 1:5–12 it appears that the church had faced increasingly fierce opposition. Paul explained that this was to be expected, for the more widely known their love and Christian character became, the more their enemies would make life difficult for them. No one would ever bother about a religious faith that meant nothing to those holding it, but the revolutionary character of the life of the Thessalonian church, and the subversive nature of the gospel itself, would inevitably provoke opposition. It would be impossible to turn the world upside down without provoking some reaction from that world. Paul reminds these Christians that though for the moment things may be difficult, God is on their side and will ultimately vindicate them.

The church and the future

A more subtle form of ‘persecution’ had also come into the church, with the appearance of forged letters claiming to be written by Paul and his associates (2 Thessalonians 2:1–12). Apocalyptic enthusiasts of some kind had taken advantage of the mention of the parousia of Jesus in the earlier letter and used the occasion to present their own point of view on the subject. Paul had to warn the Thessalonian Christians ‘not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come’ (2:2, NRSV). The exact connotation of the claim that ‘the day of the Lord has come’ is unclear. In 1 Corinthians there is mention of people who thought that the resurrection (which was generally associated with

the end of things and the parousia of Christ) had already taken place, on the basis of which belief they indulged in what Paul deemed to be unacceptable sexual practices (1 Corinthians 15:12–58). It is difficult to make any specific connection between the two groups of people, but in any event Paul goes on to emphasize here that in his view the parousia and all that it entails was not an event that could take place invisibly or mystically (which would need to be the case if it had already happened). On the contrary, he places his own expectation firmly in a context of actual events by mentioning certain historical occurrences connected with 'the lawless one' (2:3–12) that would herald the return of Christ.

The church and society

The outcome of the interest in future events that had arisen in Thessalonica was that some of the Christians had opted out of their social responsibilities and were idly waiting for Christ to return, an attitude which Paul criticized severely. For him, authentic Christian spirituality was unlikely to be demonstrated by becoming a religious hermit, but required people to play their full part in the life of the wider culture. People who did not do this, however 'spiritual' their motivation, should be disciplined by the church. It was not very often that Paul instructed a church to take disciplinary action against one of its members, but this was one such case. Of course, the other Christians were not to do this with a judgmental spirit, but in a way that was calculated to lead to restoration: 'Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers' (3:15, NRSV).

In spite of all their problems, however, the Thessalonian Christians had learned the true secret of the Christian way of life that Paul had shown them and they were rapidly becoming the sort of community of which Paul could be proud. It was in Thessalonica that Paul himself had been accused of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6), and the Christian community that he left behind him there continued in the same radical vein. As we read these letters it is easy to imagine that the Thessalonian church was in serious difficulties, but a few trivial criticisms should not be allowed to obscure the fact that this was one of the very few churches that Paul commended warmly for their Christ-like character. The

encouragement he received from these people must have been a great help to him as he faced the next big challenge of his life’s work.

CHAPTER 15

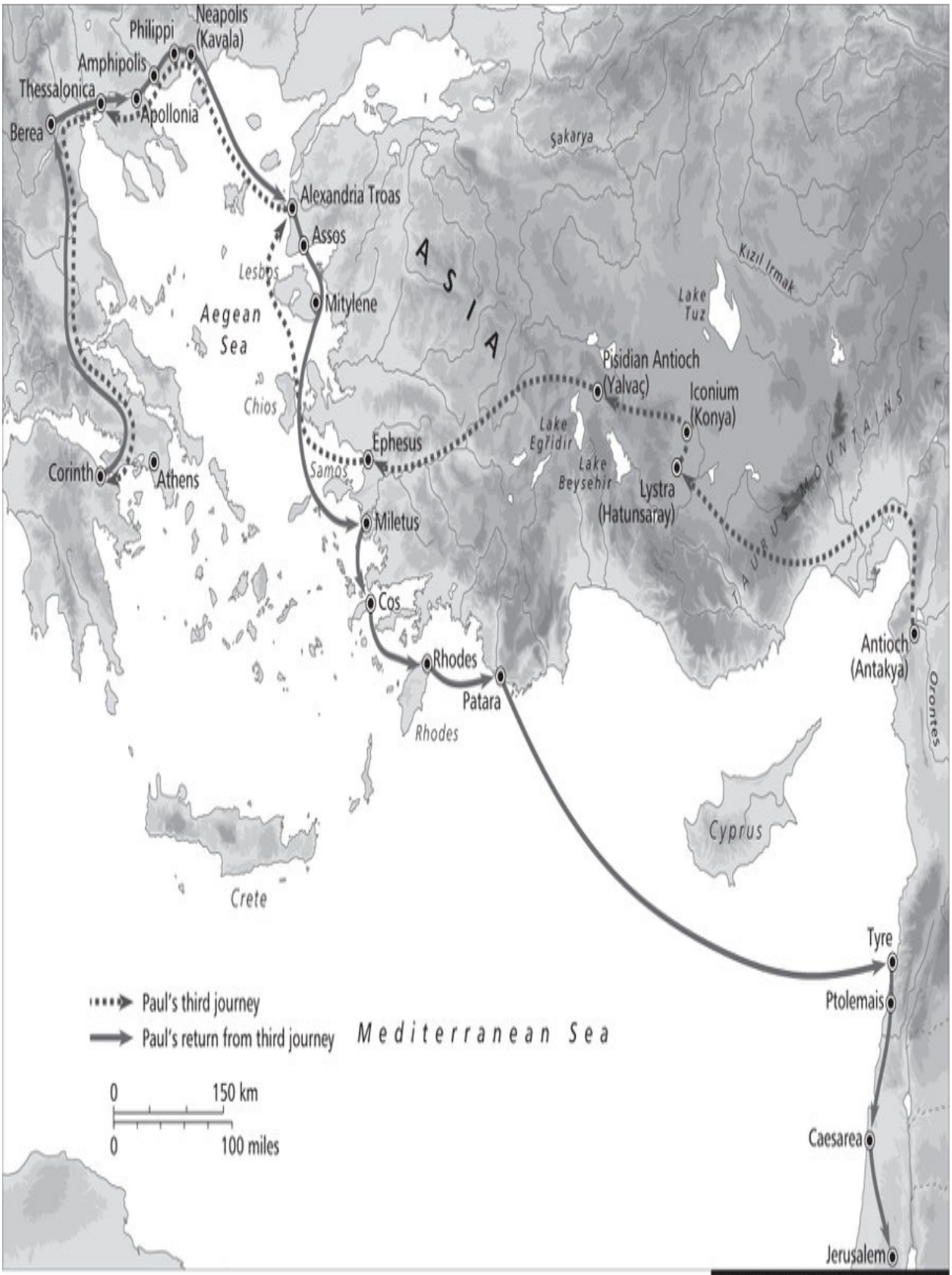
PAUL AND THE CHURCHES

When Paul left Corinth he paid a short visit to Ephesus, and then returned direct to Caesarea in Palestine, from where he went straight to Antioch in Syria (Acts 18:18–22). After a short stay there he began what is often called his ‘third missionary journey’, which was not really a journey at all in the same way as his two earlier trips had been. This third one was more in the nature of a pastor’s ministry centred on two main places, Ephesus and Corinth. Paul began with a short visit to Galatia and Phrygia (the districts where he had been during his second expedition), but instead of going north to Troas, as before, he went direct to Ephesus.

Ephesus

Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, and was therefore a centre from which, by road or sea, Paul could easily keep in touch with most of the young churches he had already established in Asia Minor and in Europe. It was also a location from which he and his colleagues could reach out into the whole province of Asia. His stay there resulted in churches being established in such places as Colossae and Laodicea, which Paul himself had not yet visited.

In the course of his three years' stay at Ephesus, Paul seems to have paid a short visit to Corinth. When he finally left Ephesus he went on to revisit the churches in Macedonia, probably Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea (Acts 20:1–2). This may have been the occasion on which he went 'as far round as Illyricum', the region of Greece on the Dalmatian coast of the Adriatic Sea (Romans 15:19, RSV). For a further three months he stayed in Achaia (probably mostly in Corinth), then went back to Macedonia (Acts 20:3). There representatives of several churches, including Luke, joined him to take a gift from the Gentile congregations to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 20:4–6).



Paul's third missionary journey.

The impact of the gospel

Paul’s long stay in Ephesus was undoubtedly the most important part of this period of his ministry, perhaps even the most significant time of his entire life’s work. In addition to being the geographical centre of all the places Paul had previously visited, Ephesus was also a prominent centre of spiritual traditions, at the heart of which was the great temple of Artemis (Diana) which was renowned as one of the wonders of the ancient world. His ministry in Ephesus was so successful that the two mainstays of Ephesian religious life were seriously challenged. One of the things for which Ephesus was well known was its great number of magicians and astrologers, many of whom became Christians and actually burned their books of magic spells. The silversmiths of the city found that their trade in selling small replicas of the temple of Artemis to pilgrims began to decline, which led Demetrius and some others to start a riot against the Christians in the city (Acts 19:23–41).

Prison again?

In spite of such successes, however, Paul endured great hardships at Ephesus – something he had come to expect when his ministry led to large-scale conversions to Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:32 he states that he fought with wild beasts there, which may suggest he was thrown into the Roman arena, though it is more likely to be a figure of speech as no one came out of the arena alive. In 2 Corinthians 1:8 Paul mentions ‘the affliction’ he endured in Asia, and again in Romans 16:7 (probably written just after he had left Ephesus), he describes Andronicus and Junia as being ‘in prison with me’. References such as these are often taken to indicate that Paul was imprisoned during this stay in Ephesus. The evidence for such an imprisonment is considered in more detail in the next chapter.

Advising the churches

This third period of Paul's ministry is of most interest because it is the time when three of Paul's greatest letters were written: 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans. They have often been interpreted as if they were really theological tracts written in the form of letters, but like Paul's earlier communications they follow the normal pattern of ancient letters, and each arose out of a specific historical situation.

Paul and the church at Corinth

The letters to Corinth present one of the most complicated historical puzzles of the entire New Testament. Galatians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians were fairly easy to fit into the account of Paul's activities recorded in Acts. But in the case of 1 and 2 Corinthians there is no relevant information from Acts, and in order to piece together the situation behind this correspondence we depend entirely on the vague hints and allusions that are found in these letters. Since it was not Paul's main purpose to give an account either of his own movements or of the state of the Corinthian church, any reconstruction of what was going on must be more or less imaginative. But there is general agreement that Paul's dealings with the church in Corinth at this time can be summarized in six stages.

Disappointing news from Corinth

During his three years' stay in Ephesus Paul received bad news of the state of the Corinthian church, in response to which he wrote a letter warning them of the dangers of immorality. This letter is referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, where Paul says: 'I wrote [in the past] to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons… but now I am writing to you [in this letter]…' (NRSV). Some scholars think that part of this previous letter could be preserved in what is now known as 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1, since that section seems to be out of character with its context in 2 Corinthians, and it begins 'Do not be mismatched with unbelievers…' (NRSV).

Paul sends 1 Corinthians

Members of Chloe's household brought further reports that the Corinthian church was dividing into different groupings and Paul's own authority as an apostle was being challenged (1 Corinthians 1:11). These reports were then confirmed by Stephanas and two others (1 Corinthians 16:17) who brought a letter from Corinth asking certain definite questions. It is probable that Paul's reply to this letter was 1 Corinthians.

Paul visits Corinth

Paul subsequently learned, perhaps from Timothy who had returned from Corinth to Ephesus, that his letter was having no effect. At that point he decided to pay a short visit to Corinth to see for himself what was happening. No such visit is mentioned in Acts, but it is clearly implied in 2 Corinthians 2:1, 12:14, and 13:1. On this visit he must have come, as he had threatened in 1 Corinthians 4:21, ‘with a rod’, for he later referred to it as a ‘painful visit’ (2 Corinthians 2:1).

Another letter

After returning to Ephesus Paul sent Titus with a much stronger letter, written ‘out of much affliction and anguish of heart’ as he puts it in 2 Corinthians 2:4 (KJV). Some think this letter is now preserved as 2 Corinthians chapters 10–13, where Paul launches a vigorous counter-attack on those who were questioning his apostolic authority, something that was almost certainly the subject of this third letter.

Good news from Corinth

Paul then left for Macedonia, having been forced out of Ephesus (Acts 20:1). In Macedonia he met Titus again, who brought welcome news of a change of attitude in the Corinthian church. He also carried an invitation for Paul to go to Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:5–16).

Paul sends 2 Corinthians

In response Paul sent a more compassionate letter, carried to Corinth by Titus. This one is probably what we now know as 2 Corinthians chapters 1–9. He also took this opportunity to write on other subjects: the relation of teachers and hearers; the hope of a life after death; the general theme of salvation; and a collection that he was organizing for the Jerusalem church. If 2 Corinthians 10–13 belongs to this same letter, Paul must have heard news of a further revolt against his authority at Corinth while he was actually in the process of writing to them, which led him to defend his own position as an accredited apostle of Christ. Some scholars think that 2 Corinthians 10–13, rather than being earlier than 2 Corinthians 1–9 or written at the same time, was actually a letter sent later, when Paul's authority was again being undermined.

So much for the circumstances surrounding these letters. But what was going on in Corinth to provoke such a lengthy correspondence? 1 Corinthians provides most information about this, and so we will focus particularly on that letter.

1 Corinthians

Life in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21)

One of the things that characterized the city of Corinth was the diverse nature of its society. Its position as an important sea port on one of the busiest routes in the Mediterranean ensured this. Here military men from Rome, mystics from the east, and Jews from Palestine continually rubbed shoulders with the philosophers of Greece. When Paul had proclaimed the good news about Jesus in this city, it was a cross-section of people from this cosmopolitan society who responded and came together to form the Christian church in Corinth. Men and women from such diverse spiritual and intellectual backgrounds inevitably brought many different experiences and ideas with them. While Paul was there the various sections of the fledgling community were held together by their loyalty to him, but when he left they started to work out for themselves the implications of their new faith, and this led to multiple disagreements.

A divided church

One outcome was that the church at Corinth had for all practical purposes divided into four different groups, mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10–17. Some were claiming that their spiritual allegiance was to Paul, others to Apollos, others to Cephas, while yet others claimed only to belong to Christ (1:12–13). These four parties reflect the diverse spiritual heritage of the Corinthian Christians:

The ‘Paul party’ quite likely consisted of libertines – people who embraced Paul’s message of freedom from the Law and concluded that this meant they could live as they liked. This was what the Judaizers who opposed Paul in Galatia had predicted would happen when the Christian message was declared without insisting that people also obey the Old Testament Law. Paul in fact always emphasized that, far from relieving Christians of moral obligations, his

message actually made more challenging demands on them. But this danger of lawlessness (‘antinomianism’) was always present in his churches.

The ‘Cephas party’ were probably legalists, people like the Judaizers who believed that the Christian life meant the strict observance of traditional Jewish practices, both ritual and moral. They may have been members of the synagogue when they first heard of Jesus the Messiah.

The ‘Apollos party’ seem to have been devotees of the classical Greek outlook. Apollos is described in Acts 18:24–28 as a Jew from Alexandria, ‘an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures’ (NRSV). Alexandria in Egypt had one of the biggest Jewish populations in the empire and several influential and gifted teachers lived and worked there both before and after the New Testament period. The best known of these was Philo (about 20 BC–AD 45), a Hellenistic Jew who specialized in interpreting the scriptures in line with the notions of Greek philosophy so as to demonstrate that Moses and others had already anticipated what the philosophers said centuries later. As an educated Alexandrian Jew, it is likely that Apollos would be steeped in this kind of scriptural interpretation. He would naturally be an acceptable teacher to those Christians at Corinth with a Greek philosophical background.

In the light of other evidence from Corinth, it is likely that the ‘Christ party’ consisted of individuals who considered themselves to be above these other groupings that focused on ordinary mortals. Just as they had experienced direct mystical contacts with deities in the mystery religions, they longed for a direct contact with Christ. If mystery gods like Serapis could be called ‘lord’, then so could Jesus. But Paul made it clear to them that in fact, ‘no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 12:3, NIV). They were trying to incorporate Jesus into a spiritual system that was altogether alien to his teaching. Since this sort of belief frequently led to libertinism in practice, these people may well have found themselves aligned alongside the ‘Paul party’ on some important ethical issues.

Confusion at Corinth

Reading 1 Corinthians we can see how each of these groups was at work, spreading its own ideas and emphases. The libertines who claimed to follow Paul encouraged the whole church not to worry about ethical norms (5:1–13). The legalists, claiming to follow Cephas's example, raised questions about the food that Christians should eat, though this time the argument was not about Jewish food laws but over food that had been offered in sacrifice to Greek deities before being sold to the public (chapters 8–9). The philosophers, followers of Apollos, insisted that their wisdom was superior to anything Paul had spoken about (1:18–25). The mystics, claiming they were following the cosmic Christ, were inclined to argue that the sacraments of the church acted in a magical way and therefore they need not worry about any possible consequences of their lifestyle (10:1–13). The resurrection had already come, and they knew it had because they themselves had been raised in a mystical way with Christ (15:12–19). They claimed they were now living on a higher spiritual level far beyond the grasp of the followers of Paul, Cephas, or Apollos (see also 4:8). Various strands in these different types of extremism led in the second century to the emergence of Gnosticism, and Corinth provides evidence of the first stirrings in that direction. Paul was not bothered about giving a name to this movement: all he saw was one of his largest churches thrown into a state of considerable confusion by fanatics operating from at least these four different directions. This was contrary to all that he understood the Christian message to be.

The answer in Christ

Paul had told the Galatians that belief in Christ would create a new community of equality and freedom for all Christians, and he had experienced this himself as he moved from city to city and found new friends among the unlikeliest of people simply because of their common allegiance to the gospel. He knew therefore that the answer to the Corinthian situation must be found in Christ. Neither Paul himself, nor Cephas, nor Apollos, nor the kind of 'Christ' that was being followed in Corinth, could achieve any lasting result. When he had first visited there Paul declared the cross of Jesus and his resurrection to be 'of first importance' in the understanding of the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:3–7; 1:18–25). Whatever Paul, Apollos, or Cephas had done in their own name was of no lasting consequence, so Paul repeated his basic message in response to the problems of the Corinthian church: 'No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ' (3:11, RSV).

Having clarified his own starting points, Paul went on to consider some of the specific problems of the church at Corinth; problems concerned with their attitudes to secular standards and institutions, and with their attitudes to one another in the gatherings of the community.

Life in the world (1 Corinthians 5:1–11:1)

Though Christians enjoyed certain privileges by virtue of their new life in Christ, they still had to live in the same social context as everyone else. In Corinth three main areas posed problems concerning the Christian's relationships with non-Christians.

Christian behaviour

At least two of the groupings in the Corinthian church claimed to have a theological reason for ignoring the accepted Christian standards of morality, and in the central part of his letter Paul mentions three particular matters that had come to his attention in this connection:

Permissiveness One thing that particularly worried him was the report that 'there is immorality among you… of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife' (5:1, RSV). Paul was never one for taking drastic action against people with whom he disagreed, but this kind of behaviour was so serious that he felt he had no alternative but to instruct the church members not to associate with the individual concerned until he was prepared to change his lifestyle. He told them: 'When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (5:4–5, RSV). The precise meaning of this instruction is not especially clear, nor is the circumstance which lay behind it (which some scholars believe may not have been a moral choice at all but something that was expected as part of the patronage system of Greek civic life). Whatever the reason, Paul was clear that the gospel should challenge such behaviour, and for such a person to remain within the Christian community would compromise its stance as a

radical alternative to the values of the empire.

Freedom Once again Paul had to emphasize that freedom in Christ does not mean the freedom to be immoral (6:12–20). Christians are not free to do as they please, but free to serve God, to whom they belong (6:19–20).

Marriage One of the specific questions which the Corinthians had asked Paul was about marriage and divorce (7:1–40). In reply, Paul permits Christians to marry (7:1–9), though he himself was not married and he could 'wish that all were as I myself am' (7:7, RSV). He forbids divorce (7:10–11), except in a case where a non-Christian partner deserts a Christian (7:12–16), and he recommends that the Corinthian Christians should remain in their present condition, either married or single (7:17–24), though he recommends celibacy as the preferable state (7:25–40). This was clearly advice given for a specific situation that had arisen in Corinth, and it is important to notice the way Paul separates his own opinion from what he believed to be the teaching of Jesus. He felt that he had Jesus' authority for saying there should be no divorce among Christians (7:10–11) but on the other issues with which he deals, in one case he makes it plain that it is 'not the Lord' who is speaking (7:12) and in another he merely says, 'I think that I have the Spirit of God' (7:40, RSV). This passage has given rise to much discussion, not least because Paul appears to devalue marriage as a less than ideal state. No doubt Paul's own experience has played its part, for as a rabbi he must have been married himself at one time (all rabbis had to be), though he clearly was not when he wrote 1 Corinthians. The most likely explanation of his own situation is that he was divorced, perhaps as a result of becoming a Christian. But there was a more fundamental reason behind his advice here, and what he recommends was based on pure pragmatism: given the precarious and unstable state of the Corinthian church at the time (7:26), there were many more important things to be done than making arrangements for weddings. Jesus himself had said something not altogether different: 'If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26, RSV), and there is a striking similarity between this and 1 Corinthians 7:29–31. Jesus was

certainly not against marriage and family life, and other passages in Paul's writings demonstrate that he also held marriage in high regard. Here, it was a question of practical priorities, and in dealing with what he perceived to be a desperate situation, drastic action was called for.

Christians and the civil law

Another cause for concern was the way Christians in Corinth were quarrelling with each other and then going to the civil law courts to sort out their grievances. Paul had to condemn this practice out of hand. For one thing, it was quite absurd that Christians, who claimed to be brothers and sisters, should go to secular courts at all: when a quarrel arises in a family, it should not be necessary to go to court with it, and surely some member of the church community ought to be wise enough to sort out these problems (6:1–6). But what disturbed Paul even more was that such acrimonious quarrels were arising in the first place. Believers ought to follow the example set to them by Jesus and suffer wrong rather than create division in the Christian community (6:7–8). In the light of what God has done for them in Christ, their petty bickering fades into insignificance (6:9–11).

Everyday life

It was possible for Christians to live independently of the secular courts, but it was more difficult to avoid other religiously-charged aspects of life in a city like Corinth. For the Corinthian church, this focused on the question of food, particularly meat. It became an issue because Corinth, in common with other Hellenistic cities, had no regular butcher's shops. No matter what its source, the purchase of meat almost always had religious connotations. The best and largest source of meat would be the many temples where animals were sacrificed to honour the traditional deities, though in cities with a substantial Jewish population meat butchered according to the rituals of the Hebrew scriptures would also be available. Either way, some Christians found themselves with a

problem. Relationships with the Jewish community were often difficult, so for the most part Jewish butchers would not wish to supply them – nor, for their part, would Gentile Christians wish to buy from them since that would look as if they were accepting the validity of the Torah's dietary prescriptions. But what about meat sourced from the temples? Insofar as they might have considered the possible religious ramifications of buying meat from this source, most Christians argued that, since the deities honoured there did not really exist anyway, the fact that animals had been offered to them in sacrifice was of no consequence. Others, however, were less certain and felt that by buying this meat they were somehow encouraging and sharing in the worship associated with it, and maybe even being spiritually contaminated by eating it. What then were they to do? Paul took up this matter in 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1, where the following four points are central to his advice:

Christians are free to eat food that had been offered to honour Greek deities, since such gods do not exist. But those who understand this must also be sensitive to the concerns of those who might see things differently. Christians who are 'enlightened' should occasionally be prepared to forgo the freedom to eat food bought from local shrines, out of consideration for those others who might be offended by such behaviour (8:1–13).

This was the sort of concession that Paul himself had made, in a different connection. As an apostle, Paul had the right to be supported by God's people, and he even alludes to the teaching of Jesus to prove it (9:14). However, he reminds the Corinthians that he had given up his right to be maintained in this way, and instead had been willing to place himself under restrictions so that his message might be accepted by all kinds of people (9:19).

Christians should also recognize that there could be real dangers in adopting an essentially magical attitude to spirituality. Some of the Corinthians apparently took the view that the Christian sacraments provided them with immunity from spiritual contamination so that they could take part in any number of non-

Christian rituals without necessarily endorsing all that was going on. Paul highlighted several episodes from the history of Israel that demonstrated the fallacy of this view, and argued that it was naïve to imagine they could share in the Lord's Supper one day and honour the local deities the next without compromising their integrity (10:1–22).

The general principle to be followed in reaching practical decisions on all these matters was not to do anything that would lead others astray, even things that might be right in themselves, but to 'do all to the glory of God' (10:23–11:1, author's translation).

Life in the church (1 Corinthians 11:2–15:58)

Paul had been asked to address several specific questions that were puzzling the church at Corinth. Some of them we have already considered, questions concerning marriage and divorce, and food bought from local shrines. But there were others, relating to the church's worship (11:2–14:40) and beliefs (15:1–58).

Worship (1 Corinthians 11:2–14:40)

As the Christians in Corinth met for worship, trying to put into practice what Paul had taught them, three practical difficulties had arisen:

Freedom in worship Paul had presumably taught them some of the same things as he had passed on to the churches of Galatia. Two of the core values of this message had been that in the church there was to be no distinction of race, class, or sex (Galatians 3:28); and that Christ had given believers a new freedom (Galatians 5:1). In relation to worship this meant that Paul, contrary to the Jewish custom of the day, allowed women to play a full part in the life of the churches. He explicitly says that he had passed on 'traditions' to that effect to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 11:2), traditions which the church members had observed. But they misunderstood the character of Christian freedom, and some women who were taking a leading part in the church's services were doing in the church community things they would not have done in front of their neighbours. The prevailing social custom of the time expected respectable women not to appear in public with their heads uncovered. The Corinthian Christians, however, argued that they were set free even from the norms of their culture, and that they should be able to express this freedom before God in the church. For Paul, this was a similar situation to the issue over buying meat, except that in this case it was not other Christians who were being

offended but the wider community. Since Paul saw a major aspect of the church's responsibility to be calling others to follow Jesus, he invited the Corinthians to adopt the same strategy as he himself had outlined previously, striving to be 'all things to all people' (9:20–24). Within that frame of reference, contextualizing the gospel was always going to involve a certain element of compromise if the message was to be heard at all and so Paul advised women who had a public role in the life of the church to follow the prevailing social custom and veil their heads, even if in an ideal world that might have seemed like a limitation of their Christian freedom (11:2–16).

Morals and worship The way the church was observing the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) also gave cause for concern (11:17–34). Instead of following the instructions that Jesus himself gave, and which Paul had delivered to them at an earlier stage (11:23–26), some of the Corinthians were turning it into an occasion for feasting and merriment by bringing along their own food and having private feasts – feasts which they ought to have held in their own homes (11:22). The party divisions that Paul was so much against were rearing their ugly heads even at the Lord's table (11:18–19), because different groups were happy with eating different foods, and in addition those who were richer had much more to eat than those who were poor, who were being left on the sidelines. All this division, not to mention the accompanying revelry and drunkenness, was dishonouring both to the purpose of their gathering and also to the Christians themselves. They were giving no thought to what they were doing, and some of them had brought upon themselves the judgment which they deserved (11:29–32).

Charismatic gifts and worship Another important feature of life in the Corinthian church was the exercise of spiritual gifts. Basic to Christian experience in the apostolic churches was the conviction that Christians were people empowered by the Holy Spirit. They were 'charismatics', people with charismata (a Greek word meaning 'gifts of grace'). These spiritual gifts included speaking in ecstatic tongues (glossolalia), the interpretation of such tongues, prophecy (as in Acts 13:1–2), and the working of miracles by the apostles (Acts 19:11–12). The Corinthian Christians possessed all these gifts

and many more in abundance, and they were so eager to exercise them that several people could be taking part in worship at the same time. This was clearly unsatisfactory, and Paul had to remind them that 'God is not a God of confusion but of peace' (1 Corinthians 14:33, RSV), which meant that when the gifts were being used, it could be taken for granted that if God was truly inspiring them it would happen in a way that would lead to the building up of the whole church (12:7). Paul had no problem about recognizing the validity of all the various charismatic manifestations that had appeared in Corinth. He emphasized that they were all divinely inspired and had a rightful place in gatherings of the community. Just as the human body has different parts, each of which must make its contribution to the smooth operation of the body, so it is in the church: each of the gifts exercised by different members of the church should contribute to the smooth operation of the whole (12:14–31). Not every Christian would be given one of the more spectacular gifts, such as speaking in tongues, but they were all of value. Over and above this, one gift should be common to them all, namely love, which was the only basis on which the other charismatic endowments should be desired (14:1–2).

Belief (1 Corinthians 15:1–58)

Paul finally turns to what he regarded as the core of essential Christian belief, which coincidentally also happened to be one of the most contentious issues engaging the Corinthian Christians: the resurrection of Jesus. Some were claiming that in their mystical experiences they had already been raised to a new spiritual level above that achieved by more ordinary Christians, a notion that Paul believed to be linked with a fundamental misunderstanding about the resurrection of Jesus. He deals with it in two ways.

Firstly he reminds the Corinthians of the firm historical foundation on which belief in the resurrection of Jesus was based (15:3–11). In doing this he provides the earliest New Testament account of belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

Secondly he goes on to show how, if the resurrection of Jesus was a material occurrence (as he and the other apostles believed it was), this must be a guarantee that Christians also will be raised at the last day in the same way as Jesus was raised from the dead. Therefore, in view of the centrality of Jesus' resurrection for the whole of Christian belief, those who denied its reality by reimagining it as a series of mystical experiences were actually denying the basis of the Christian faith (15:16–18).

More arguments and letters

1 Corinthians was not the end of Paul's correspondence with the Christians at Corinth, though he must have been at least partly successful in persuading them to change their minds as we hear nothing more of questions about the resurrection, or marriage, or things like meat purchased in the local temples. But there were still problems, this time especially connected with the arrival of messengers claiming to be 'apostles' sent from the church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 11:1–15). Paul had already dealt with people like this in the churches of Galatia, but those who came to Corinth were not 'Judaizers' in the strict sense. They were not asking the Corinthians to accept the requirements of the Law. Rather they were aiming to persuade them to transfer their allegiance away from Paul to the more conservatively inclined leaders of the original church in Jerusalem.

Paul had apparently chosen to visit the church at Corinth while these people were in residence there, and this is the 'painful visit' to which he refers in 2 Corinthians 2:1. It was certainly painful for Paul, for he was insulted by these false apostles and their claims that his authority was questionable. He left in a hurry, something he later recognized as a mistake for it seemed to confirm what his opponents were saying about him (2 Corinthians 1:12–22). As a result the Corinthian Christians were left in a turmoil. Who were the real apostles, and how could they tell the difference between true and false? Their loyalty swung from one to the other, and in order to clarify the issues Paul wrote to them yet again. The letter he wrote this time is contained in 2 Corinthians.

While 1 Corinthians has a clear line of argument from beginning to end, 2 Corinthians has quite a different feel to it and reads more like an anthology of Paul's advice on different subjects than the kind of progressive discussion we find in other letters. The train of thought in 2 Corinthians certainly changes direction rather abruptly at several points:

2:14–7:4 is quite different from what precedes and follows it. Moreover, 7:5 makes quite good sense if it is read as the continuation of 2:13. Even within this section itself, however, 6:14–7:1 seems to break the sense of what goes before and after it. Could it be that this section in particular contains what were originally separate letters, perhaps including some of those that we know Paul certainly wroteto Corinth, but which are not separately identified anywhere in the New Testament?

Chapters 8 and 9 seem to deal with the same topic (the collection for the church in Jerusalem), but with no reference to each other. In particular, chapter 9 introduces the subject quite independently of what has already been said about it in the previous chapter. Could 2 Corinthians 9:1–15 be another separate letter, this time written before all the troubles began, to recommend Titus and some others to the church at Corinth and to encourage the Christians there to give generously for Jerusalem?

Chapters 10–13 are in sharp contrast with the whole of chapters 1–9. At the end of chapter 9, Paul expresses satisfaction that the Corinthians have sorted out their problems, yet at the beginning of chapter 10 he is on the offensive again. So were chapters 10–13 originally written as a separate letter at a time when the situation was more desperate?

The major argument against seeing 2 Corinthians as a compilation of several shorter letters is the somewhat random way in which these other brief sections seem to be incorporated into the present text. For example, why would a collector of Paul's letters have mixed them all up with each other, inserting separate shorter letters halfway through longer ones in such a way as to disrupt the sense of both? Would it not have been more natural to have included them in sequence one after the other? Virtually all commentators are convinced that 2 Corinthians is indeed a compilation, though most regard it as just two letters

with chapters 10–13 being a later one than chapters 1–9, and accounting for the apparent changes of subject matter between 2:13 to 7:4 and 8:1–24 and 9:1–15 as digressions in Paul's own thinking. This makes good sense, especially since we know that Paul sent more than two letters to Corinth (and there has never been any doubt that all the material found in 2 Corinthians is authentically from Paul). Ancient editors were conscious of the need to use writing materials as economically as possible, and that may well be the reason why 2 Corinthians was gathered in this way: it is approximately the same length as 1 Corinthians, which means it would fit on a similar length of scroll.

2 Corinthians

The letter falls naturally into four main sections.

Facing up to problems (2 Corinthians 1:3–2:13)

Paul knew that he needed to explain the turbulent nature of his relationship with the Corinthian church. But there was also the question of true and false apostleship, and he clarifies his position on both these topics in the opening thanksgiving section (1:3–11). Here he draws attention not only to his affection for the church in Corinth, but also to his conviction that suffering and weakness are in some way an inevitable part of the true service of God. To cope with persecution, Paul needs to trust wholeheartedly in God, but he also needs the prayerful support of his readers. This is why he appears less self–confident and aggressive than his opponents, for he does not regard his relationship with his converts as a one-sided enterprise: he needs their prayers just as much as they need his guidance. Paul also needed to reassure the Corinthians that he could be trusted. His unexpected visits and letters, and last-minute changes of plan, had given them the impression that he was unstable (1:12–2:4). They had concluded that he was afraid to visit them because he knew at heart that the claims of the ‘false apostles’ were true. Paul obviously felt these criticisms deeply, and defends himself against the charge that he was acting selfishly. Nothing could be further from the truth: he had written a letter rather than making a visit because he hoped that would be a less painful way of correcting them (2:4). Personal animosities must also be put right, and both Paul and the church should be prepared to forgive those who have been particularly offensive (2:5–11). Paul obviously refers here to a specific person – according to some, perhaps the man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:5 who was cohabiting with his own step-mother, but more likely someone else who had been especially abusive to Paul himself.

What is an apostle? (2 Corinthians 2:14–7:4)

The major point at issue was Paul's authority as an apostle, and he introduces this subject with an expression of his own gratitude to God for his experience as a participant in 'Christ's victory procession' (2:14). Yet although he is in such a close personal relationship to Christ, that does not allow him to boast in a triumphalist way about his own abilities, for endowment with the Holy Spirit brings great responsibilities, and it is the recognition of this that Paul believed made him different from the other so-called 'apostles' who had arrived in Corinth (2:17). Unlike those who had come from Jerusalem, Paul did not depend on official letters to establish his credentials, but was content for the validity of his work to be judged by its results in the changed lives of his converts and the quality of his own personal lifestyle (3:1–18). If Christians are truly serving God, then God's presence should be visible for all to see (3:18), something that he identifies as one of the distinctive advantages of Christian faith over other spiritual traditions (3:4–17). Even so, this provided no sort of guarantee that apostles could expect to be unaffected by the ordinary problems of everyday life (4:1–15). For though the gospel is a powerful, life-giving message, God chose to entrust it to 'common clay pots', who are 'often troubled… sometimes in doubt… badly hurt… always in danger of death for Jesus' sake…' (4:7–11). Jesus himself had had the same experience, but after the cross had come the resurrection, and this for Paul provided the key to the Christian life. In Galatians 2:19–20 he had emphasized that the secret of his faith was the presence of the living Christ within him, and the same theme recurs here (4:11). For Paul this was where the emphasis ought rightly to be placed: the messengers of the gospel must not be confused with the message itself, and the fact that the 'spiritual treasure' is in 'common clay pots' highlights the reality that 'the supreme power belongs to God, not to us' (4:7). Reflecting on the various physical dangers that he had faced led Paul onto the subject of life after death. This had already been a major topic in 1 Corinthians, but here the perspective has changed and he asks different questions, no doubt as a result of his recent narrow escapes from death (presumably in Ephesus, 2 Corinthians 1:9). What he says in 5:1–10 is one of the most complex passages in all his letters and has given rise to much speculation about the nature of his thinking on the subject. But two things are quite clear: he is still opposed to the views of those Corinthians who had been claiming that 'resurrection' was a matter of a person's inner spiritual experience; and he still

upholds the Jewish belief in a material resurrection over against the Greek view of an immortal soul that would survive the disposable body. However, he continues to insist (as he had done in 1 Corinthians 15:42–57) that the resurrection existence is continuous with this life, though not identical with it, for he envisages that God will replace ‘the earthly tent we live in’ with ‘a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens’ (5:1, NRSV).

Throughout, he maintains the tension between present and future that is characteristic of the teaching of Jesus, insisting that even the final resurrection state would only be the final outworking of what God was already doing in the lives of Christian people. This is why the way believers think, the way they behave, and their standards and values, should reflect here and now the reality of God’s living presence: ‘No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards.… When anyone is joined to Christ, there is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come’ (5:16–17, author’s translation). Viewed in this light, Paul’s sufferings could in no way contradict his claim to be an apostle. On the contrary, he regarded them as the clearest possible demonstration of the truth of that claim (6:1–10). Perhaps by this stage Paul felt that he had given a more detailed defence of himself than was really necessary, for he concludes this section by an appeal for his readers to show the same honesty with him as he has shown with them (6:11–13). He then moved on to warn them that the Christian lifestyle should be wholly different from a secular lifestyle. Christians must reflect God’s own values and standards (6:14–7:1) by setting an appropriate distance between themselves and the prevailing values of the culture. It has often been supposed that Paul was here referring to matters of personal morality, especially marriage relationships. No doubt that would be covered by what he says, but his advice is more wide ranging for he is encouraging his readers to be prepared to put God first in every area of life, not just where they find it convenient.

Looking to the future (2 Corinthians 7:5–9:15)

Paul now moves on to the impact of his painful letters, which had apparently led to a change of heart on the part of the Corinthians and which Titus had reported to him (7:5–16). It was no doubt on that basis that Paul felt it was appropriate to invite them to make a contribution to the collection he was organizing for the financial relief of the church in Jerusalem (8:1–9:15). This was not the first time the Corinthians had heard of this (1 Corinthians 16:1–4), but their stormy relationship with Paul had prevented anything being done about it earlier. Paul urges them to be generous not simply as a matter of duty, but as a loving response to what God had done for them. The coming of Jesus into their lives had been an unmerited act of God's generosity and love, and they should meet the needs of others in the same attitude (8:9). He also believed that such an act of generosity would improve relations between the purely Gentile churches which he had established and the more traditional congregations of Jewish believers back in Palestine (9:1–15).

Authority and charisma (2 Corinthians 10:1–13:10)

In this section Paul again takes the offensive. It almost certainly originated as a separate letter, but if it was not we would have to surmise that there had been further challenges to his authority even while he was in the process of writing. This time he was being criticized because of his personality. ‘Paul’s letters are severe and strong,’ his Corinthian opponents were saying, ‘but when he is with us in person, he is weak, and his words are nothing’ (10:10). Clearly, he lacked the charismatic appeal of the ‘false apostles’ who had come to Corinth. They had no struggles with either self-doubt or persecution as he did, but were always boasting about their own mystical experiences and spiritual maturity. Paul had already addressed this through the earlier discussion about weakness and power, and he tackles it here less systematically by suggesting that these others only seem so impressive because ‘They make up their own standards to measure themselves by, and they judge themselves by their own standards’ (10:12). Indeed, worse than that, for Paul accuses the Corinthians of accepting ‘anyone who comes to you and preaches a different Jesus, not the one we preached; and you accept a spirit and a gospel completely different from the Spirit and the gospel you received from us’ (11:4). He then launches into a wide-ranging attack on those who were questioning his own credentials on this spurious basis, dealing in turn with his relationship to the Corinthian church (11:1–6), his style of life (11:7–11), and the ultimate source of his authority (11:12–15). Far from showing him to be second rate, his suffering and persecution actually demonstrate the reality of his calling (11:16–33).

The ‘false apostles’ also seem to have been claiming more spectacular manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s gifts than Paul. There is plenty of evidence to show that was a recurring problem in Corinthian church life (1 Corinthians 12–14). Paul recognized that boasting about such things does no good, but he also needed to set the record straight and point out that he too had ‘visions and revelations given me by the Lord’ that included being ‘caught up to the third heaven… into Paradise’ where he ‘heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat’ (12:1–4, author’s translation). This out-of-body experience locates Paul in a line of mystical prophets going back to Ezekiel,

whose many similar experiences later became the inspiration for the emergence of Merkavah, a mystical group within mainstream Judaism. In spite of this, however, Paul returns to the theme of suffering and weakness as the cornerstone of his apostolic status, arguing that it is only as people recognize their own weakness and trust entirely in God that they can speak of being truly Christian (12:7–10). Finally, Paul reminds them that he will be visiting Corinth again and they would do well to put their lives in order before his arrival. Despite what his opponents have claimed, he is prepared to denounce them face to face, though it would be so much happier for everyone if they would get back to the basics of the gospel first and recognize that it is only when they each acknowledge their human weakness that God's power can work effectively in their lives (13:1–10).

So Paul came to the end of the most complicated correspondence he ever composed. Like Galatians, the Corinthian letters were crafted in the white heat of controversy, which only adds to our difficulties in understanding them. Paul was under attack by his friends as well as his enemies, something that must have given him considerable reason to pause and re-examine the core values of his message. He wanted to avoid the pitfalls of the past without in any sense compromising his basic position that in Christ all barriers of race, sex, and social standing are removed, and all women and men stand equal in the freedom given to them by the Holy Spirit. It was probably thoughts of this kind that dictated the form of Paul's next major letter, which is quite different from any of those we have looked at so far.

Romans

Towards the end of his extended dealings with the Corinthian church, Paul visited the area of Corinth and spent some three months there. After this he was intending to go to Jerusalem with the delegates from the Gentile churches who were taking a gift to the Jewish church and then he planned to visit Rome before travelling further west to Spain. It was natural for Paul to wish to visit Rome, but the Christian situation there was quite different from other cities with which he had dealings and would need some careful advance planning. For one thing, Paul was not the founder of the Roman church, which meant he needed to be careful about appearing to meddle in a situation that was none of his business. In addition, the church in Rome did not consist of one single congregation, but was a whole network of smaller groups meeting in different people's homes around the city. This feature of Roman Christianity could almost certainly be traced back to the Jewish community there, which was similarly fragmented with many different synagogues, ranging from the most conservative to the most progressive. The Christian cause certainly had its origins in these synagogues, and no doubt the spectrum of Christian belief was equally wide, and largely defined along the same lines, except with the additional question of Gentile believers and their responsibility in terms of the Jewish Law and traditions. Though some Christians in Rome no doubt admired Paul, others must have been highly suspicious of him, particularly in relation to what they knew of his attitude to Jewish customs, and some scholars believe that Romans was written with the specific intention of engaging with such opponents. Others speculate that this could also have involved dissension between the Jewish and Christian communities in Rome. Whatever the underlying reasons (and there may well have been elements of all these involved), Paul felt the time was right for him to re-state his message in a form that would not easily be open to misinterpretation by either sympathizers or opponents, and so he decided to prepare for his visit to the capital by sending a letter to the various factions within the Christian community there, containing a reasoned statement of his own beliefs. This was the letter to the Romans.

Purpose

Though Romans has been regarded as a comprehensive summary of the whole of Paul's thinking, this is a misleading and unhelpful way of looking at it. He was certainly in a more reflective mood when he wrote Romans than when he sent Galatians or any of the Corinthian letters. But there are several important aspects of Paul's thinking that do not feature here at all. There is no eschatology, nor is there anything substantial about the nature of the church, or indeed on the resurrection or Eucharist. Romans is best understood as a more carefully articulated account of some of the major themes of Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians (1 Corinthians in particular). Romans and Galatians cover so much of the same ground that it has often been supposed they must have been composed around the same time as each other. But Romans is more carefully nuanced than Galatians, and Paul takes greater care to spell out his arguments. It is probably more accurate to describe Romans as the argument of Galatians as it looked when viewed through the spectacles of the struggles he had faced in Corinth. Paul was conscious of two audiences. The most obvious one comprised the Roman Christians, to whom he would send it to prepare the way for his visit to the city as a summary of some of his beliefs that he thought would be most contentious for them. But before that he was going to Jerusalem, where he knew he was likely to encounter opposition, from those who followed Jesus as Messiah as well as those who did not. Though he had forcefully dismissed the arguments of the Judaizers in Galatians, he realized that there was some substance to their arguments, and he also knew that the way he had expressed himself in the course of angry exchanges in Galatia and Corinth was open to misunderstanding. Now was the time to deal with this, and to refine those aspects of his message that needed clarification while not watering down the essential elements of his thinking on the place of the Gentiles within the Christian community, and the significance of all that in relation to traditional Jewish observances. He knew that on his arrival in Jerusalem with the collection he would need to give a satisfactory account of himself to the church leaders there, and this time he was determined to be more precise than he had previously been in explaining his message. In that connection, Romans was a draft of some of the things he intended to say to them.

Contents

Because Romans is so closely based on Paul's previous letters to the Galatians and to the Corinthians there is no need to summarize it in such great detail here. The arguments about the Law and its place in relation to the ancient covenant are exactly the same in Romans as they had been in Galatians, and even the allusions to the Abraham story are repeated. Our discussion is therefore intentionally limited to those aspects of the argument that are distinctive or unique to Romans. The letter falls into three major sections.

Knowing God

The first part of Romans, chapters 1–8, is one long theological argument starting from a text in the prophet Habakkuk: 'the just shall live by… faith' (Habakkuk 2:4, KJV). Here Paul argues in a way that is already very familiar from Galatians, indeed many of the points he makes are the same. At the heart of this section is the issue of law ('works') and faith, which is addressed through an implied contrast between what God regards as justice ('righteousness') and the default positions of the wider Roman culture. The quotation from Habakkuk that initiates the discussion referred to God's faithfulness ('grace'), suggesting that those who aspire to live in the new just society proclaimed by Jesus can only do so on the basis of the divine love and generosity of which Jesus also spoke. No one, whether Jew or Gentile, can escape from their moral bankruptcy apart from this gift of 'the righteousness of God' (1:18–3:20), which consists of forgiveness for the past and empowerment for the future – and can be obtained only through faith in Christ, and not by good works (3:21–4:25). In making this statement, Paul widens the discussion on law to include all law, Roman as well as Jewish. Law might provide information about how we should live, but it cannot effect transformation to a new way of living: that comes only by receiving the free gift of new life offered by God through Christ. Those who accept that offer are 'justified' and receive the Spirit's power to become like Jesus. 'Faith', in effect, is commitment to the change that will bring about transformation as believers engage in the work of God to bring a new sense of justice to a world in

transition.

Though he adopts a style that would be familiar to the recipients of the letter, depicting imaginary opponents having an argument among themselves, Paul still uses illustrations from the life of Abraham (4:1–25). He then goes on (5:1–8:39) to describe the results of this new relationship with God: freedom from wrongdoing, freedom from the Law, and freedom from death through the working of the Spirit of God in Christ (8:37). These themes had featured previously in either Galatians or Corinthians, but Romans includes several new elements, all of them a result of Paul's experience as he had seen his message misunderstood and corrupted in the churches. This time he deals directly with the problem of antinomianism (6:1–8:39), by making it clear that though Christians are set free from the need to observe formal rules in order to live in ways that reflect God's justice, that does not mean they have no responsibility for their actions. They might be set free from oppressive legalism, but have in fact entered into a new kind of service, not now as 'slaves of sin' (6:17, NRSV) but 'slaves of God' (6:22). Those who are set free by Christ are not freed so they can do as they please, but so they might be 'conformed to the image of God's Son', something that is the work of the Holy Spirit empowering them to live in God's way (8:29, author's translation). This was already implied in Galatians but is spelled out here more comprehensively so as to minimize the complaints of the Judaizers against Paul. It is, in effect, the teaching of Galatians as reformulated by Paul after his experiences in Corinth. There is, however, one new element in here that would not be lost on readers living in Rome, for in 8:18–24 Paul extends his understanding of salvation beyond the lives of people to include the physical universe. In doing so he not only challenges the belief that Rome could deliver peace on its own terms, but also negates its claim to be establishing a transformed global world.

Israel and salvation

In chapters 9–11 Paul moves on to discuss more specifically his understanding of the Law and of Judaism. In a very convoluted argument, he reaffirms his pride

in his own people and their spiritual heritage, while at the same time struggling to understand why Jesus was not more widely recognized as the Messiah. He goes to some pains to affirm that, while it might seem that he is arguing that the Jews as a nation have been totally abandoned by God, things are more complex for he still believes in the ancient promises, and also in God's sense of justice and fair play. If Israel seems to be on the sidelines of God's purposes, that is the result of their own choice in rejecting Jesus and the way of 'faith', preferring to stick with the way of 'works'. Even now, though, God's rejection of Israel cannot be final, for there is still a faithful remnant (presumably people like him, 11:1–10), and God's ultimate plan is to bring together people from all races, Jews included (11:11–36).

How Christians should behave

Paul then moves away from strictly theological statements to write about the practical application of divine justice in Christian living (12:1–15:13). Here he deals with the Christian's relationship to the church (12:1–8), to other people (12:9–21), and to the state (13:1–10), summing up Christian duty as a whole in the words 'love is the fulfilling of the Law' (13:10, NRSV). He thereby tried to emphasize again that standards of Christian morality are to be produced not by sets of rules and regulations imposed from outside, but by the power of the Holy Spirit working within the believer. Paradoxically, the outcome of the Spirit's work will be that the law of God is in fact observed, and the key idea of this law is love. Paul illustrates this by reference to two live issues: the eating of vegetables in preference to meat (14:1–15:6) – not for vegetarian reasons, but out of similar concerns to those highlighted in Corinth by the issue of buying meat from Greek temples; and the general attitude of Jews and Gentiles towards one another within the church (15:7–13).

The final chapter of the letter concludes with many greetings to the various home-based churches in Rome, which in themselves provide an interesting insight not only into the diversity of the Roman church but also the mobility of Christians more generally in the first century, for Paul clearly knew personally

many of those he mentions, having already met them in other cities around the empire.

Paul and his Jewish roots

For the past fifty years a key focus of scholarship has been on Paul's understanding of his faith as a Christian in relation to his inherited Jewish tradition. For centuries, it had been assumed that Paul became a Christian at a point in his life when he was disillusioned by Judaism. Some passages in his letters can be construed in that way, and when these were placed alongside strident statements contrasting God's freely given love with human efforts to achieve salvation, it was natural to conclude that Paul was saying dependence on God's grace was the Christian way, while the Jewish way was to try and earn God's approval by doing good things ('works of the Law'). This understanding of Paul's thought goes back at least to Martin Luther, the German monk who became one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. He himself had been all but destroyed by the legalistic demands of the medieval catholic tradition, and when he started to read Paul's writings (especially Romans) it was as if Paul was speaking directly to him, and it was a truly liberating discovery to realize that achieving God's favour was not a matter of doing enough good works to merit God's attention, but instead was about recognizing that God accepts people as they are, and living a Christian life is not about measuring up to legal requirements but committing oneself to live in the light of God's justice as expressed in the teaching of Jesus and experienced through divine love, generosity, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. As subsequent generations reflected on this, they began to read Paul in the light of Luther's struggles with the medieval church rather than through the prism of first-century Judaism. Just as the church had come to believe that outward ritual by itself was the key to achieving salvation, so it was taken for granted that the Jews must have believed that Law keeping by itself was an act that could gain God's approval. Just as medieval church leaders had played down God's love and generosity, so too had the Jews, and instead of accepting salvation as a gift from God they preferred to rely on external things like circumcision, keeping rules and regulations, and the performance of empty ritual. Since Paul had addressed Luther's own needs so powerfully, presumably he had wrestled with the same issues himself in ancient Judaism, and therefore the Judaism he knew must have been reduced to the pitiful and pointless effort of trying to earn God's favour by building up religious merit through keeping the law, observing rituals, and so on.

Insights of this sort undoubtedly had a profound impact on Martin Luther, and through him on the entire course of subsequent Christian history in the West. It was an accurate perception of the problems facing medieval Catholicism. But was it also a true picture either of Paul or of the Judaism with which he was familiar? Protestant scholarship certainly thought so, and for the next 400 years it was taken for granted that Judaism was based on a legalistic understanding of God's justice in which religious duty was defined solely in terms of the keeping of mindless rules and regulations. In contrast, Paul's spirituality was seen as a more spontaneous and immediate response to God, vital and relevant because it broke away from all that. Those sections of the New Testament which seem to reflect a more structured approach to faith were either questioned or rejected as being secondary interpretations of the core of authentic spirituality. Luther himself started this process with his easy dismissal of the epistle of James as having no value because of its emphasis on 'works' which could be contrasted with Paul's focus on 'faith', and his antisemitic leanings were spelled out very clearly in his book On the Jews and their Lies, published (in German) in 1543. This not only encouraged readers of the New Testament to distinguish the earliest Christian communities from what followed them as the church became more institutionalized, but in the study of the Old Testament also it led to the prophets being much more highly valued than the priests (because they were allegedly responsible for the development of the legalistic system that Paul allegedly found to be so oppressive).

This understanding of Judaism was questioned from time to time, especially by Jewish scholars who failed to recognize their own faith in Paul's letters as interpreted in this way. It is not as easy as it might sound to extract a systematic account of Judaism out of the disparate writings of the various ancient rabbis – any more than it would be possible to construct a normative account of the whole of Christian belief out of the writings of Christians from many times and places. Like the New Testament itself, the writings of the rabbis were addressed to different times and places, and consist of many different styles of literature ranging from close textual exegesis of the Hebrew scriptures to jokes told over the meal table. But all the evidence suggests that far from being oppressed by the Law Jewish believers regarded it as God's gift and its observance was not an unnecessary burden but a delight. It gradually became obvious that many

Protestant scholars who were making confident pronouncements about the nature of Jewish beliefs had no direct knowledge of the subject but were simply repeating what they had heard from others, much of which was based on an unwarranted identification of ancient Judaism with the medieval church. The Jewish scholar Claude G. Montefiore (1858–1938) challenged the consensus as early as 1914, as also did the Christian George F. Moore (1851–1931) some years later. But in the Europe of the early twentieth century such observations were not welcomed, and Nazi ideology made it politically expedient for Judaism to be portrayed as a primitive and oppressive faith as compared with (especially) Protestant Christianity.

By the mid-1970s, the time was right for a reappraisal of these questions, and it came in 1977 with the publication of a book by Ed Sanders, entitled Paul and Palestinian Judaism. In it, he reviewed the arguments put forward by earlier scholars, but went on to insist that the most useful way to compare and contrast two faith traditions such as Judaism and Christianity is not by asking abstract theological questions about beliefs, but by identifying the inner dynamic of the respective communities through exploration of their ‘patterns of religion’, which include two particular questions: How do people get into this faith community? and How do they stay in it? After exhaustive exploration of the Judaism of Paul’s day, Sanders suggested that for all its diversity there was a common thread between these two in what he called ‘covenantal nomism’, which was based on the belief that God’s loving actions on behalf of people (‘grace’) were the foundational starting point and that believers responded in obedience to this expression of God’s love. In discussing Jesus’ ethical teaching in chapter 6, we have already noticed the significant part played in the Hebrew Bible by this pattern of God’s actions followed by human response. The Judaism of Paul’s day was fundamentally the same, and on that basis Sanders argued that the starting point for understanding it should be the expression of God’s undeserved love, and therefore keeping ‘works of the law’ was not about ‘getting into’ the faith community, but was part of what was necessary in order to ‘stay in’. On this view, the assumptions of Judaism, far from being diametrically opposed to Paul’s Christian faith, were exactly the same. Later scholars have both refined and questioned Sanders’s understanding and have also defined this understanding as the ‘new perspective’ on Paul.

How, then, ought we now to understand Paul? In some passages, he does indeed appear to imply that Judaism was about works, and not about faith – indeed, that Israel actively preferred the one to the other (e.g. Romans 9:32). If he did not mean what Luther and traditional Protestant interpretation thought he meant, what exactly was he saying? Several possible answers to that question have been proposed:

Some scholars have sought the answer in the fact that Paul's origins were not with the mainstream of Judaism as it existed in Palestine, but among Hellenistic Jews. It has been suggested that Jews living in the wider Roman empire faced different challenges, among which were the influence of Greek ways of thinking, often combined with ridicule of traditional religious practices that were recommended in the Torah. Under this kind of pressure, Jews had been forced to become more defensive about the centrality of practices such as circumcision, sabbath-keeping, food regulations, and so on, which in turn had led to a narrow legalism in which the externals became more important than the faith. If it could be sustained, this would be a neat way of solving the problem, as it would enable both Jewish (Palestinian rabbis) and Christian (Paul) sources of written information to be correct, with the apparent confusion being blamed on a form of Hellenistic Judaism that no longer exists, and was never in any case the mainstream. However, the distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism which this presupposes is highly problematic, as Palestine was an integral part of the Hellenistic world, and the New Testament itself attests to the presence and influence of Hellenistic Jews even in Jerusalem.

Sanders himself proposed a somewhat different way of looking at things, by suggesting that Paul's starting point was not actually Judaism, but Christianity. In other words, Paul began by reflecting on all the benefits he perceived himself as enjoying as a consequence of his faith in Christ, and in looking back at Judaism depicted that as the opposite. Since as a Christian Paul knew that, for himself, there was no salvation anywhere else except through Christ, then by definition there could be no full salvation in a Judaism that did not recognize Jesus as Messiah. Similarly, if the empowerment given by the Holy Spirit enabled him to live in a way that was satisfying for him, and pleasing to God,

then presumably Judaism had not helped him to do either of those things. And if Christ now gave him direct access to God, then the Law must have been unable to deliver that. By adopting this procedure, Paul then produced a picture that, by definition, held Judaism up as the exact antithesis of Christianity – a picture that served his purposes in the context of the debates he was involved in, but which inevitably tended to simplify the relationship between the two, and therefore in the end helped to create a false and misleading caricature of Jewish spirituality. On this view, Paul was not actually reacting to any specific form of Judaism, but was rather meaning to articulate his understanding of Christian faith.

Others have accepted this somewhat opportunistic view of Paul's intentions, but have argued that, in the end, Paul had an inconsistent and incoherent set of beliefs and attitudes. Yet others, however, have tried to disconnect Paul from actual Jewish practices and beliefs by proposing that his understanding of the Law was based on a bookish reading of the Old Testament, in which it can easily be made to seem that keeping the Law had a salvation-earning quality.

Several points can be made in relation to this ongoing debate:

It is clear that the presuppositions of scholars have played a major part in this debate from start to finish. Luther himself was certainly more influenced by his own circumstances than by a dispassionate understanding of Paul in his first-century context, while much twentieth-century scholarship was undoubtedly in tune with an antisemitic fascism, if not directly created by it. Likewise, much contemporary scholarship is motivated by the perfectly understandable desire to re-imagine the New Testament in a form that will not perpetuate antisemitism and Christian persecution of Jews.

In relation to Paul, it is important to remember that all his writings were occasional documents, written to address specific issues in particular circumstances. None of his letters was intended to be a reflective,

comprehensive account of his thinking. All the negative references to Jewish practices and the Law were written in the context of acrimonious debates with those who wanted to insist that Gentile believers must first become Jews before being accepted as proper Christians. Though it has been argued that Judaism would never have produced such people as these Judaizers, that is hard to believe, if only because Paul clearly thought his letters were addressing a real group of people. Moreover, he expected the arguments of those people to be counteracted by what he had to say. Given his overwhelmingly pragmatic intention in writing, it is difficult to see why he would have done anything other than address the actual views being put forward by his opponents. His own credibility must have depended on dealing with what was actually being claimed. Since Paul's own letters are, in the end, the primary source material for his arguments with opponents, it is a curious logic that would dismiss the value of the primary sources, but still insist that modern readers of those sources can have accurate insights into what was going on. Whether they were being faithful to Judaism or not, the simple fact seems to be that Paul did meet people who were legalists in the narrow sense. In that context (represented especially by Galatians, but also in certain sections of Romans), it was inevitable that Paul should play down the importance of the Law, in the face of opposition from those who wanted to do the opposite. In point of fact, however, not all of Paul's references to Jewish spirituality are negative, and some (e.g. Galatians 2:14; Philippians 3:5–6; Romans 9–11) are very positive indeed. It may be that the problem is not so much with Paul, as with those who want to take his letters and distil from them some system of thinking that can be labelled 'Pauline theology'. Do we possess sufficient resources to systematize Paul's thinking in this way?

A major concern for those who wish to oppose the new perspective on Paul is the way in which this understanding of his thinking is regarded as challenging aspects of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, which has been based on a particular understanding of the terminology of 'righteousness' ('justice', Greek dikaiosunē) used by Paul in Galatians and Romans. Engaging with this question would take us well beyond the New Testament and into other aspects of more recent Christian history and theology, though the various understandings of atonement have already been outlined in chapter 7. Allied with this, however, is a difference of opinion in relation to what Paul understood by 'faith'. For Paul, 'faith' was about trust – trust in the possibility of the new world of which Jesus had spoken, and of which he was convinced not through

intellectual argument but as a result of his life-changing encounter with the living Jesus on the Damascus road. It was the sort of belief that one might have in a close friend, not a belief about God but belief in God's trustworthiness. Living by faith is not therefore an invitation to believe certain things about God – that would just be replacing one set of works by another. Rather, it is an invitation to open one's life to the potential of dynamic encounter with the crucified and resurrected Jesus, and to create space for the transformational power of his Spirit to challenge those behaviours that are contrary to the core values of his kingdom.

Running through much of this debate is an underlying methodological assumption that is sceptical about the possibility of religious experience. In the final analysis, Paul's motivation stemmed from his experience on the Damascus road, which was not a conversion from Judaism to Christianity but brought about a change in his understanding of Judaism from within. All the evidence shows him continuing in faithful observance of traditional religious practice, with the one difference that he now recognized Jesus as Messiah, and that for him represented the fulfilment of all that Judaism was about. To describe him as being against Judaism and for Christianity is to import a distinction between the two faith traditions that only came about centuries after Paul's day. Paul's Damascus road experience led to intense reflection on his inherited belief system, and his later statements about Judaism and its traditions were not the result of a process of abstract intellectual reflection but were the outcome of his new experience of the risen Christ. But experience itself has tended to be a problem for Western theology ever since the Enlightenment, and as a result there has been a need to reduce anything that seems like religious experience to other categories of psychology or whatever. Inevitably, that leads to an exclusively cognitive, analytical perception of Paul's thought, on the basis of which it is impossible to trace a straight line from his Judaism to his Christianity. But if the validity of spiritual experience is allowed, there is no need for such a linear development from the one to the other, and Paul's own accounts of his conversion as well as the narratives in Acts all emphasize the sense of continuity between his earlier life and his work as apostle to the Gentiles.

CHAPTER 16

PAUL: THE END OF THE JOURNEY

In Romans 15:23, Paul made the surprising statement: ‘I no longer have any room for work in these regions’ (RSV). Asia Minor and the Balkan peninsula, where Paul had been working, certainly had not been fully evangelized by this time, but Paul viewed his own missionary calling in a different way. He regarded his responsibility as the formation of Christian communities at strategic points throughout the Roman empire, from where others could reach out into the surrounding regions. At this point in his life he felt he had completed that in the eastern empire and he would now move west towards Italy to fulfil his dream of ensuring that during the course of his lifetime the gospel would be spread to all the major cities of the Mediterranean world. Italy already had churches at its most important centres, so in the longer term Paul was looking even further west to Spain, though he still believed that, as an ‘apostle to the Gentiles’, he had something to contribute to the church in the most strategic position of all: Rome, the capital of the empire. He was normally reluctant to enter what had previously been the sphere of other missionaries, but he decided to make an exception in this case, and so he planned to visit Rome before moving further west. First, though, he had other urgent matters to deal with.

Generosity and its unexpected consequences

In Romans 15:31, Paul asked his readers to pray ‘that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints’ (RSV). Paul knew that he was hated in Judea more than anywhere else, even by some who were Christians. In the eyes of many, he was just a heretic and a traitor to his Jewish heritage. As a Pharisee he had been entrusted with the priceless privilege of interpreting the Law, but as a Christian he had set the Law aside so as to accommodate Gentiles and in the process implied that law of any sort was powerless as a source of moral inspiration. In reality, Paul’s view was more subtle than that and not only did he value his Jewish heritage but in writing Romans he had given powerful expression to his feeling that God had not completely rejected the Jewish people. But he also believed that the whole point of the scriptures was now summed up in what he had discovered about Jesus, whom he regarded not only as Messiah but also as the true fulfilment of all the ancient promises.

A collection for Jerusalem

The collection that Paul had organized in the Gentile congregations as a gift for the church at Jerusalem was intended to confirm his continuing commitment to his own people, an expression of solidarity between Gentile and Jewish believers. He hoped this generosity would show that, whatever differences might exist between the Jewish and Gentile Christian churches, they were united in care for one another. So Paul set off for Jerusalem accompanied by Christians from Beroea, Thessalonica, Derbe, and Ephesus, along with Luke and Timothy. He must have sensed that this was a risky venture, for on the journey he stopped off at Miletus and sent for the elders of the Ephesian church. In the course of that meeting he made it clear that while he hoped to return to them, it was more likely that he would suffer 'imprisonment and afflictions' in Judea. But he was determined to go because he regarded the expression of unity between Jews and Gentiles as a fundamental part of his ministry, and something that was an essential witness to the gospel (Acts 20:4–24). Paul's fears and expectations were fully realized when he arrived in Jerusalem. Reports reaching Judea ahead of him exaggerated the extent of Paul's break with Judaism by ignoring his personal commitment to traditional Jewish practices. James, who was now the leader of the church in Jerusalem, explained the situation to him more fully: 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs' (Acts 21:20–21, RSV).

James shared Paul's hope that the collection would pacify these hostile Jewish Christians and advised him to make a conciliatory gesture to them by paying the expenses involved in a ritual vow being undertaken by four Jerusalem Christians, and by sharing in their fast (Acts 21:23–24). Paul readily agreed to this, for his policy had always been one of accommodation (1 Corinthians 9:22). Towards the end of this fast, some Jews from the province of Asia spotted Paul in the temple and convinced themselves that he had defiled the sacred site by admitting his Gentile companions to its inner court. This was a very serious

crime and was one of the few misdemeanours carrying the death penalty that the Romans allowed the Jewish authorities to try and punish themselves. To ensure that no one committed this crime unknowingly, an inscription stood over the main gate of the temple, reading (in three languages): ‘No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and its enclosure. Anyone caught doing so will have themselves to blame for their ensuing death.’ Two such inscriptions, in Greek, have been unearthed on the temple site in Jerusalem.

Arrest and trials

Those who accused Paul of violating the temple in this way wanted to kill him there and then, but a Roman commander arrived and rescued him – not out of any sympathy for him or his message, but probably in the hope of avoiding a riot (Acts 21:30–36). This Roman officer assumed that Paul must be a political agitator and was about to have him beaten when Paul claimed the immunity from such treatment that was his right as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:22–29). Because the accusation against him was clearly a religious matter concerned with the Jewish Law, the Sanhedrin was the proper body to deal with it. But when they met to hear what he had to say, Paul opened his defence by stating that he was still a good Pharisee as he believed in the resurrection of the dead, and in response to that the two major groups on the council (Pharisees and Sadducees) started arguing among themselves (Acts 23:1–10).

The Romans always felt insecure in Jerusalem and when it was learned that a plan was afoot to kill Paul he was taken under armed guard to Caesarea, the Roman headquarters on the coast of Palestine, where he would escape the direct notice of the Jewish authorities and the matter could be dealt with under Roman law. Paul was again tried before the Roman procurator Felix, and this time the charge was not only that of defiling the temple, but also of provoking civil disorder wherever he went. There is a clear parallel here between the trials of Paul and the earlier trials of Jesus, for in both cases the original starting point was a religious dispute that was redefined as a political charge before a Roman judge. Though Felix, like every other Roman official, disliked anything that might cause civil disorder, he was convinced of Paul's innocence. He postponed a decision on the case, partly in the hope of receiving a bribe, and partly for fear of arousing yet more trouble among Paul's accusers if he was formally declared to be innocent (Acts 24:1–26).

At this point (about AD 59) Felix himself was recalled to Rome to account for his own misconduct in relation to other matters. The new procurator, Porcius Festus, heard Paul's case again and suggested another trial in Jerusalem. This

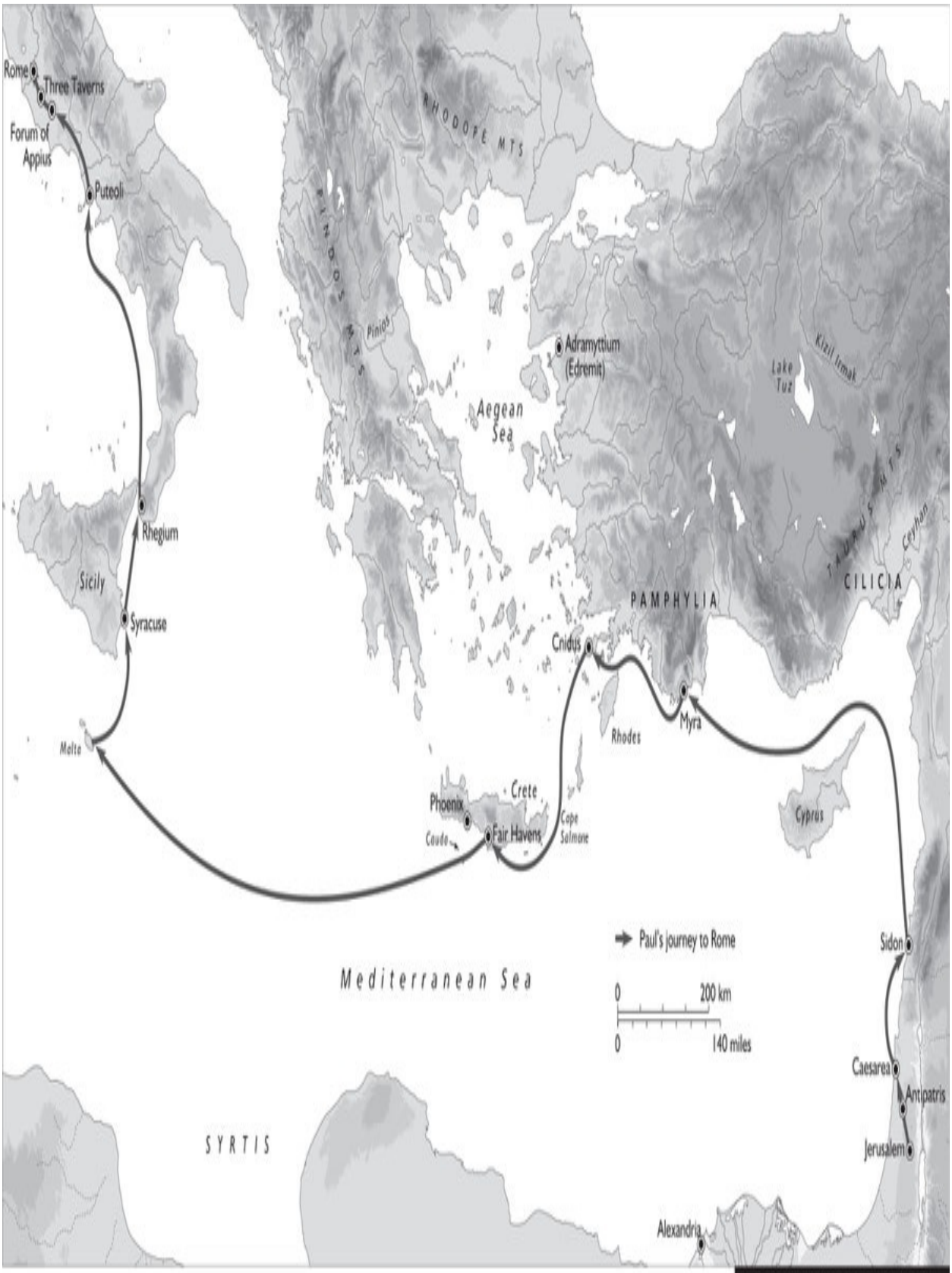
had no attraction for Paul: he knew the risk of assassination there, and he could also foresee further delays. His imprisonment had already lasted two years, and he was impatient to reach his immediate goal by visiting Rome. If he was forced to go there as a prisoner, that would be better than not going at all, and so he decided to exercise his right of appeal to the supreme court of the Roman empire, the emperor himself (Acts 25:1–12). Paul's decision to appeal to Rome took Festus by surprise, for he realized the weakness of the case against him and was at a loss to know what to write in a report to the emperor. When Herod Agrippa II visited Caesarea, Paul was again called to appear before both men in the hope that Agrippa, who knew more about Jewish affairs, would be able to suggest a solution. Both rulers appear to have been impressed with Paul's message, though they tried to pass it off by joking about it (Acts 26:1–32).

Destination Rome

At last Paul got his wish and was sent off to Rome accompanied by Luke and another of his friends, Aristarchus. He travelled on one of the prison ships that made regular voyages from Palestine to Rome at this time. The Romans imported criminals from elsewhere in the empire to provide entertainment by fighting with one another or with wild animals in the amphitheatres of Rome. Though it was a cruel death, many of those who were transported in this way preferred a ‘heroic’ death facing gladiators or wild animals to the slow and painful process of crucifixion, which would have been their alternative fate.

Paul was apparently treated as a special case, no doubt related to his status as a Roman citizen and also the fact that he seems to have been reasonably well-off. Like any other rich Roman, he travelled with two companions and was taken into the captain’s confidence, even being consulted about details of the voyage. Luke’s narrative account of the voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1–28:13), with its graphic descriptions of storms and shipwrecks, is widely regarded as a first-hand account of the journey (Luke was one of his companions), and is certainly one of the most gripping such stories in the whole of ancient literature. After many adventures on the way, Paul eventually landed at Puteoli in southern Italy, where he was warmly welcomed by the local Christians (Acts 28:13–14), and then as he got nearer to Rome some of the Christians from there came out some distance along the road to meet him. For two years Paul remained under house arrest in a property which he rented for himself, protected by Roman guards who would be paid by him. Despite the unanticipated circumstances of his arrival in Rome, Luke depicts this as the fulfilment of Paul’s calling to be apostle to the Gentiles and part of God’s plan that he would challenge the empire in its own capital. Following his previous practice, Paul contacted the leaders of the Jewish community there, with some of them believing his message but the majority rejecting it. After that Paul turned to the Gentiles, and in spite of the limitations imposed by his house arrest the final picture of him is ‘preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered’ (Acts 28:31, RSV). Paul had achieved his objective. On the Damascus road he had been commissioned as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 26:18) and Luke

leaves him at the point where he had fulfilled the terms of this calling, for by this time every strategic centre throughout the eastern empire had a Christian community which owed its origins to Paul’s unceasing endeavours.



Route of Paul's voyage to Rome.

When did Paul die?

Luke was more interested in recounting the progress of the Christian message from Jerusalem to Rome than in the messengers who spread the gospel, which no doubt explains why the story in Acts ends when it does. But all the traditions of the early church report that Paul met a martyr's death at Rome during the persecution ordered by Nero in AD 64. We may suppose that, despite the long delays, he was ultimately brought to trial in Rome, and perhaps was sentenced to death immediately after this – though in view of the reluctance of Felix and Festus even to commit him for trial it is unlikely that he could have been found guilty on the charges under which he had been referred to the emperor's court. Since this trial would take place in about AD 62, Paul presumably engaged in other activities until his final trial and death under Nero a couple of years later. This is certainly the view taken by early church tradition and so Eusebius, for example, recorded that 'after defending himself the apostle was sent again on his ministry of preaching, and coming a second time to the same city, suffered martyrdom under Nero' (Ecclesiastical History 2.22). There are two possibilities for his further activities:

One is that Paul fulfilled his original intention of going further west to Spain. There is no biblical evidence to support this, though there are local traditions in Spain itself to this effect, and also a statement that he did so in1 Clement5 (a letter written sometime afterAD95 by Clement of Rome to the church at Corinth). But it is more likely that the originators of these traditions based their statements on what Paul said in Romans 15:24, and assumed that since he wanted to visit Spain he must actually have done so.

The other possibility concerning what Paul did after his supposed release arises from the references to travels in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). These letters may suggest that Paul went to some of the places he had

previously visited in Asia Minor and Greece, and also some others of which there is no mention either in Acts or in the earlier letters, such as Colossae, Crete and Nicopolis.

It is not essential to assume that such visits took place during an otherwise undocumented period towards the end of Paul's life, for Acts by no means gives a complete account of all his earlier travels. In 2 Corinthians 11:23–27, for example, Paul mentions many incidents not included in Acts, but which had presumably occurred in the course of his pastoral ministry in Ephesus and the surrounding areas. Nevertheless, it would require considerable ingenuity to fit the travel references that are implied in the Pastoral Epistles into the Acts narrative. It is certainly easier to suppose that they represent further missionary exploits after his first visit to Rome – though even then it is no simple matter to fit all these references together to reconstruct a plausible journey. There are also other difficulties involved in understanding the Pastoral Epistles, which we shall come to shortly.

Letters from prison

In addition to 2 Timothy, Paul refers to himself as a prisoner in Colossians, Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon, and it was traditionally assumed that they must have been written during his period of imprisonment at Rome from AD 60 to 62. This is the only imprisonment recorded in Acts, though it is not the only possibility and at least one or two of these four letters may have been written during an otherwise unrecorded imprisonment in Ephesus which happened during Paul's three-year stay there.

Writing towards the end of his stay in Ephesus, Paul stated that by comparison with others he had experienced 'far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death' (2 Corinthians 11:23, RSV), while Romans 16:7 (written shortly after he left Ephesus) mentions two others as 'my fellow prisoners'. In 1 Corinthians 15:32 he states that he 'fought with beasts at Ephesus' (RSV), which is probably not to be taken literally as fighting with beasts almost always ended in death, so it is probably a synonym for some especially fierce confrontation with the authorities, perhaps the same as 'the affliction we experienced in Asia' (the province of which Ephesus was the capital, 2 Corinthians 1:8, NRSV). Other evidence that Paul was imprisoned at Ephesus is to be found in the Latin introductions to New Testament books that were written in the second century under the influence of the Gnostic Marcion. The second-century Acts of Paul also includes the account of an imprisonment at Ephesus, followed by an encounter with lions in the arena, from which Paul was delivered by supernatural intervention. While these last pieces of evidence are of dubious quality, the combination of such information with the clues provided by Paul's own writings makes it quite likely that he did suffer a period of imprisonment during his three-year stay in Ephesus.

The fact that Paul may have been imprisoned there does not, of course, make it necessary to believe that he wrote the 'prison letters' from Ephesus. But arguments can be advanced to support this view:

It is claimed that the friends of Paul who are mentioned as having made contact with him during this imprisonment would be more likely to have been in Ephesus than in Rome, which was a long way from their homes. Against this must be set the fact that little or nothing of a specific nature is known about most of these associates of Paul, and the one whose activities is best documented (Luke) was certainly with Paul in Rome though, according to Acts, not in Ephesus.

It is argued that Philemon's slave Onesimus would have been more likely to run away to Ephesus, which was only about eighty miles from his home in Colossae, than to Rome, which would have been almost 800 miles away. This is not as convincing as it sounds for at that time all roads literally did lead to Rome and a runaway slave would arguably find it easier to disappear in the capital of the empire than in a provincial town the size of Ephesus.

Philippians gives the impression that there was much travelling to and from Paul's prison, and Ephesus was significantly nearer to Philippi than Rome. This is often taken to be a strong argument for supposing that Philippians at least must have been written from Ephesus.

The strongest argument for an Ephesian origin of these letters is that in them Paul was looking forward to an early release, after which he intended visiting his friends in both Philippi and Colossae. In Romans 15:28, however, he had made it plain that after his visit to Jerusalem his intention was not to revisit churches he had founded before, but instead to go west to Spain.

It is almost certain, then, that Paul did have a period of imprisonment during his stay in Ephesus, and quite possible that Philippians at least, with its mention of frequent journeys between Philippi and Paul's prison, may have been written at

that time. If this was the case, the letter to the Philippians would need to be dated about AD 55 instead of AD 62.

The church at Colossae

Colossians and Philemon were written at the same time as each other, the former to the church and the latter to one member of it. Timothy is associated with Paul as the author of them both, and the same group of people are mentioned in them: Aristarchus, Mark, Demas, Epaphras, Luke, Archippus, and Onesimus. Though Colossae was not too far from Ephesus, where Paul had worked for three years, he had never visited the town and the church there had most likely been founded by Epaphras, who was probably one of Paul's converts in Ephesus. The fact that such a thriving church had been established at Colossae by this time is striking proof of the effectiveness of Paul's missionary strategy of establishing his own work in a central place from which others could reach out to the surrounding areas.

City life in the Roman empire

Unlike Jesus and his first disciples, Paul was a city person and his entire ministry was carried out in an urban environment. His converts were all city-dwellers, and their life together had to make sense within that context. Given the magnificence of the many buildings and monuments left behind by the Romans, it is easy to create romantic images of life in their cities. But the monuments and public buildings reflect the life of significant people, whereas Paul mostly worked among ordinary folk whose buildings have not survived. The way that Paul used family language in speaking to his communities, encouraging them to think of one another as brothers and sisters, reveals a lot about the broken family ties that many city-dwellers struggled with. There was constant population movement from countryside to the cities, as the state or rich individuals annexed family-owned farms and the displaced people migrated to the cities to find work. Traditional family relationships were broken and city-dwellers were largely strangers to one another. They also represented many different nationalities: Antioch in the time of Paul had as many as eighteen separate ethnic quarters. Though upper-class Roman houses had elaborate water and sewage systems, life for ordinary people was very different. Suburban sprawl was unknown, and cities tended to stay within their original boundaries which meant that expanding populations created overcrowding and high population density. The rich built multi-storey tenements and rented them out to working people, many of whom could afford no more than a single room per family. Tenements often had workshops on the ground floor, and it is quite likely that the Christian communities met in these same spaces, which means most of them must have been relatively small with a typical church consisting of the members of several families who all lived in the same building. Some of them would be literate, though most would not be, and there would also be different levels of economic prosperity. Churches such as Corinth and Colossae included relatively rich individuals whose large villas provided the meeting place for the church, while a Roman colony like Philippi would by definition be the exclusive preserve of well-off retirees. But these appear to have been the exception.

Epaphras visited Paul during his imprisonment and gave him a generally encouraging report of the Colossian church. But one thing that was causing him real concern was the emergence of a collection of opinions and practices that has often been labelled ‘the Colossian heresy’. This appears to have combined some of the practices that Paul was opposing when he wrote Galatians with beliefs that seem to have had some things in common with the opinions held by the ‘Christ party’ in Corinth. The ethnic superiority championed by the Judaizers had been combined with the intellectual élitism commonly found among private Greco-Roman religious cults, and the practical outcome was the emergence of a group of people in the Colossian church who considered themselves better Christians than the rest of them. As Paul understood it, these people were proposing that a complete and lasting salvation could not be achieved simply by faith in Christ, but required additional insights into spiritual matters that could only be acquired through a secret knowledge imparted in some mystical experience as well as participation in ritual practices such as circumcision, observing traditional Jewish festivals and sabbaths, and avoiding certain foods. In practice, much of this must have seemed very similar to what was being demanded by the Judaizers in Galatia, who were also promoting the value of circumcision and other rituals, though the underlying ideology among the Colossian Christians was based on quite a different foundation. For the Gentile Christians of Galatia, the issue was whether to observe the requirements of the Torah as an integral part of obedience to the religious covenants of the Hebrew scriptures, whereas in Colossae such observances were advocated by people who seem to have been religious ascetics, and what they were looking for was something that would help them to check ‘the indulgence of the flesh’ (Colossians 2:23, RSV). They had no interest in the Judaizing position that Gentiles should first become Jews in order to be good Christians, and the fact that they chose to achieve their asceticism by adopting certain practices and attitudes from the Torah was almost a coincidence. The way Paul replies to them makes this clear, for he mentions none of the issues that were so central to his argument in Galatians, but instead opposes them by highlighting the underlying moral and spiritual issues that are raised by any kind of ascetic practice.

Colossians

Like the later Gnostics, some of the Colossians had been suggesting that they should invoke other spiritual entities and that Jesus was just one of several possible divine emanations. Against this, Paul firmly asserted that ‘In Christ all the fullness [Greek plēroma, a technical term in Gnosticism] of God was pleased to dwell’ (Colossians 1:19, author’s translation). Indeed, he went further than this by reminding his readers that in Jesus ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (2:9, NRSV). Some were claiming that they needed to experience something deep and mysterious if they were to find full salvation, and Paul agreed with them. His own calling could be described as the presentation of ‘the mystery’ (another technical term for the Gnostics) – but, far from being something hidden, this ‘mystery’ was the very thing that lay at the heart of all Paul’s preaching, the simple fact of Christ’s own life at work within them, empowering them to be the kind of people who could fulfil God’s will (1:27). Everything the Christian needs is to be found in Christ, for in him ‘are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (2:3, RSV).

In order to undermine the contentions of those who insisted on some further, more advanced, mystical insights, Paul reminded his readers of the rich spiritual heritage they already enjoyed:

Were some of them claiming to be super-spiritual because they were circumcised? All Christians, said Paul, have received ‘a circumcision made without hands’ (2:11, RSV) when they fulfilled the true meaning of the old ceremony by ‘putting off the body of flesh’ (their former way of living) in order to enter the new dimension of life in the power of the Spirit of Christ.

Were some claiming to have a new kind of life that other Christians did not have? Then they should recognize that all Christians have been made alive by

God through what Christ did on the cross (2:13–15).

What about ritual observances, designed to keep ‘the flesh’ in subjection? These also were of no real value, and even in terms of their own original purpose they have been superseded, because they were but ‘a shadow of what is to come’. Since the reality has now arrived in Christ, they are no longer valid. Regardless of such theological arguments, though, they were a waste of time in practical terms, for though they may have ‘an appearance of wisdom [another favourite Gnostic theme] in promoting rigour of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body… they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh’ (2:23, RSV).

Instead of fixing their attention on these things, Paul advised the Colossians to live up to their true position in Christ. Whoever they might be, and whatever experiences they claim to have, all Christians stand equal before God, all face the same challenges (3:5–11), and there is only one way for them to be overcome: ‘Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God… there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all, and in all’ (3:2–3, 11, RSV).

Instead of following a false set of values based on mystical speculation, the Colossians ought again to remind themselves that the true ambition of the Christian must be to become like Christ (3:12–17). By their emphasis on asceticism and speculation those Colossian Christians who had adopted this outlook had actually removed Christian faith from the sphere of real life. But Paul was convinced, as always, that Christianity was essentially incarnational, and its spirituality was not rooted in some other esoteric world but was to be grounded in everyday life in this one. So he ended his letter by showing how the power of Christ that operates in the Christian (1:27) might be worked out in the family (3:18–21), at work (3:22–4:1), in the church (4:2–4), and in life in general (4:5–6).

Philemon

This letter is linked to Colossians as it is a personal note to one of that church's leading members: Philemon. He must have been quite affluent, for the Christians met for their regular meetings in his house (verse 2) and he also had a number of slaves, one of whom, Onesimus, had run away from Colossae, perhaps taking some of Philemon's possessions with him (verses 18–19). While on the run he had met Paul, and as a result he became a Christian himself. Paul knew it was his duty, both as a citizen and as a Christian, to return Onesimus to his master. There were serious legal penalties in the Roman empire for anyone harbouring runaway slaves and in addition, Paul appreciated that any other course of action would potentially threaten his friendship with Onesimus. For all these practical reasons, Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae, along with this short personal letter. Of course Paul's action in doing this raises other questions about his attitudes to slavery as an institution, and modern readers might reasonably wonder how this episode fits in with Paul's categorical statements elsewhere that freedom is at the very heart of the Christian gospel (e.g. Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). This and related issues are given further consideration in chapter 17. Here it is worth noting that Paul did explicitly express the hope that he was not returning Onesimus to exactly the same position as he was in before, for he sent him back as 'not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ' (verse 16). Moreover, he instructed Philemon to 'welcome him back just as you would welcome me' (verse 17). There may have been even more than that implied in Paul's request, for it has often been thought that Paul was actually asking Philemon to release Onesimus from his service so that he might return to work full-time with Paul (verses 11–14).

There is no way of telling what happened when Onesimus got back to Colossae, as he never features anywhere else in the New Testament. At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius mentioned a person called Onesimus who was leader of the church at Ephesus, describing him as 'a man of inexpressible love' and 'an excellent bishop' (Ignatius, To the Ephesians 1). If this was the same person, that could explain why a short personal letter to Philemon was preserved and included in the official collection of Paul's letters to churches. Depending on

the date when Paul wrote the letter, this identification could be possible, but in any case it makes good sense to suppose that Philemon must have complied with Paul’s request, otherwise this note would undoubtedly have been quickly forgotten.

The church at Ephesus

Uniquely among Paul's letters, Colossians makes explicit reference to another letter: 'When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea' (Colossians 4:16, NRSV). Laodicea was not far from Colossae, and Paul wanted the churches to exchange letters. There is, of course, no 'letter to the Laodiceans' in the New Testament. Noting this omission, the church of the early centuries lost no time in producing one, and there is indeed a Letter to the Laodiceans known in a Latin version. This letter is almost impossible to date accurately, and though it may also have existed in Greek there is every reason to suppose that it is a very much later composition. It contains no real substance, and consists of a series of bits and pieces from Paul's other letters strung together in a more or less aimless way. A more plausible suggestion regarding the identity of the letter from Laodicea to which Colossians refers is that it forms the core of what is now the letter known as Ephesians. This contains in a fuller and more carefully argued form the same kind of teaching about the person of Christ as in Colossians, but without the pointed references to local persons and events. There are certainly indications that Ephesians was intended for a wider readership than just the Christians at Ephesus.

The words 'at Ephesus' in Ephesians 1:1 (the only indication that the letter was destined for that city) are not found in the best and oldest manuscripts of this letter. In recognition of this, some versions of the New Testament relegate the words 'at Ephesus' to a footnote.

There are no personal greetings in this letter, which is especially surprising considering that Paul probably had more friends in Ephesus than anywhere else.

In the middle of the second century, Marcion referred to Ephesians as 'the letter

to the Laodiceans’.

It makes sense to suppose that Ephesians was a circular letter addressed to a number of different congregations. The words ‘at Ephesus’ in Ephesians 1:1 would be found in the copy that went to that city, while the copy referred to in Colossians 4:16 would have the words ‘at Laodicea’ instead.

Ephesians

In Ephesians, Paul again emphasized the central place of Christ in the plan of God and in the life of the Christian believer. He began by reminding readers of the great privileges they possessed in Christ. Though the people to whom he was writing had previously 'lived in the passions of [their] flesh' (Ephesians 2:3, NRSV), God had put them in a new position. They had been 'made… alive together with Christ… and raised… up with him, and made to sit with him in the heavenly places' (2:5–6, author's translation). Every individual Christian had become a part of God's new creation in which God's plan was 'to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth' (1:10, author's translation). Some of the first readers of this letter had been told these things before by Paul himself, for his special ministry was 'to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ' (3:8, RSV) and to demonstrate how those 'riches' could be received and enjoyed in real life. Some may have been influenced by the sort of misguided ideas that had circulated in Colossae, but they would only find the true satisfaction they desired if they were willing to be 'filled with all the fullness of God' (3:19, NRSV), which could be found nowhere else but in Christ.

After setting out this comprehensive and all-embracing description of the cosmic Christ as Saviour of the world and as the source of all physical, mental, and spiritual knowledge and activity, Paul went on to draw attention to its practical implications. If his readers were indeed members of Christ's body, new people and children of God, they must show by their actions who they really were:

In the church they should be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (4:3, RSV). As in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul again claimed that they could expect the unity of the Spirit to be displayed by the giving of 'gifts of grace' to 'the body' for its growth and development (4:7–16). Because of the close relationships enjoyed by believers within the Christian community, any wrong done by one member would inevitably affect the others – something that would 'grieve the Holy Spirit of God' (4:30, NRSV). In view of what God had done for

them in Christ, Christians ought to ‘be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave’ them (4:32, author’s translation). Paul could even advise them to ‘be imitators of God’ (5:1, NRSV), by showing in their dealings with one another the same loving generosity as God had shown to them in Christ.

In personal morality Christians should ‘take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness’ (5:11, NRSV). What ought to characterize them instead was that they were ‘filled with the Spirit’ (5:18), the results of which Paul had previously listed in Galatians 5:22–23.

In their social life Christians must again be ruled by the fundamental principles of justice, love and generosity, whether the matter at issue was in the family (5:21–6:4) or the workplace (6:5–9).

Finally, Paul reminded his readers that they could expect to encounter opposition, ‘the wiles of the devil’, against which they must ‘put on the whole armour of God’ (6:11, NRSV). As an ethical theory, what Paul had put forward here would be impossible to carry out. How could anyone hope to be ruled by self-sacrificing love of the same kind that God had shown in Christ? Paul knew from his own personal experience and his knowledge of the experience of others, that it was possible in only one way: if the Christian was ‘strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s might’ (6:10, author’s translation). This was one of the constant themes of all Paul’s writings: it had appeared in what was probably the first letter he wrote, and a lifetime of work for Christ had only strengthened his belief that ‘if we live by the Spirit’, we ought also to ‘walk by the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:25, RSV).

The church at Philippi

With the exception of Philemon, Philippians is the most personal of all Paul's letters. It was written to acknowledge a gift that the Philippian church had sent to help him financially while in Rome. One of the Philippian Christians, a man called Epaphroditus, had carried the gift from Philippi and had been a great help to Paul during his short stay in Rome. Most of the letter, which was sent back to Philippi with Epaphroditus, is concerned with personal matters affecting Paul's possible release and expressing his warm affection for the generosity of the Philippian Christians. In what was probably his first letter, one of the central features of Paul's self-understanding had been his conviction that 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20, RSV), and as he faced the uncertainty of trials and possible death he again set the dominant note in Philippians 1:21 by a similar statement, just five words in Greek: 'For to me to live is Christ.' From start to finish, Paul was motivated by his experience of the risen Christ, as he saw in his own life what might be possible for those who were willing to commit their time and talents to the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Again, the overwhelming significance of the Damascus road experience for his entire worldview is brought out in Philippians, as Paul reflects on the way his discovery of Jesus as Messiah had revolutionized his own career, and invites his converts to join him in affirming that 'I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (Philippians 3:8, RSV).

Philippians

Paul had always been especially close to the Christians in Philippi. It was the first church he established on European soil, and it was also apparently one of the few that had not been torn apart by damaging arguments about Christian faith and behaviour. The letter begins with an appreciative expression of thanks to God for all that these Christians had meant to him (1:3–11). Unlike some others, they had consistently ‘helped me in the work of the gospel from the very first day until now’ (1:5), which was why Paul felt able to accept their financial generosity (1:7) – something that had seemed unwise in the case of more volatile congregations such as that in Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:8–18). Because of their open and friendly attitude, however, he was confident that their Christian living would be marked by ‘the truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce, for the glory and praise of God’ (1:11).

Paul continued to sound this note as he brought them up to date with his own situation in prison (1:12–30). His main ambition in life had always been to direct attention to Jesus, and he felt even his imprisonment was doing that (1:12). Since Christians already have the Spirit of Jesus living within them, Paul knows that physical death could only deepen that experience (1:21). Death may have been preferable to prison for Paul, but he could see good reasons why God would probably allow him to live a little longer so as ‘to add to your progress and joy in the faith’ (1:25). To suffer for the cause of the Christian gospel was not a sign of defeat, but of triumph, and so he advised them neither to be sorry for his present plight, nor afraid of persecution themselves (1:27–30).

There was, however, one thing that bothered Paul about the church at Philippi. Some of the Christians were quarrelling with each other, and Paul later named two particularly argumentative women, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–3), though they were clearly not the only ones. This was bound to be an embarrassment, if not a denial of the core values of the gospel. For if the good news was that through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, God was showing how peace could be accomplished through justice, love, and generosity

– then the existence of strife in the Christian community, of all places, was a contradiction in terms. In urging the contentious parties to ‘look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own’ (2:4), Paul quoted from what many believe to have been an early poem that must have been familiar to his readers, and perhaps to Christians in other churches as well (2:6–11). Reasons for regarding this passage as a quotation are that it interrupts the flow of Paul’s language and has a distinctive style with a definite rhythm, carefully balanced lines, and the ‘parallelism’ that was characteristic of Hebrew poetry. It is often referred to as the ‘Christ hymn’ though there is no evidence to show that it was ever put to music. Its origin has been the subject of much debate and there is no agreement either on its authorship or origin. Some scholars challenge the idea that it is a quotation at all, and believe it was composed by Paul himself for the express purpose of addressing the Philippian situation by challenging the conventional ways in which Roman society encouraged social climbers to aspire to high office. Either way, Paul’s reason for inserting it here is clear enough, as it draws attention back to the example of Jesus, who for Paul was at the centre of all Christian faith. This is one of only two places where Paul explicitly held up the example of Jesus as a pattern for Christian behaviour (2 Corinthians 8:9–10 is very similar), and it is striking that the aspect of Jesus’ life that he chose was not his compassion, care or good works, but his relinquishing of divine status when he became a human person. This idea was very important for Paul, and lay at the heart of much of his thinking. In order to be a Christian at all, people must be prepared to give up their own claims to determine their destiny and instead offer all that they are to Christ for empowerment and transformation. This was something he had himself discovered on the road to Damascus, and it runs like a golden thread through the fabric of all his letters. Paul then moved on to explain in more practical detail what it means for a Christian’s life to be infused with the life of the risen Jesus himself. For his readers, it should mean a lifestyle that would be distinctively Christ-like, shining like stars in a dark sky (2:12–16), while for himself it would eventually lead to a martyr’s death. But that too was a privilege (2:17–18). Epaphroditus (himself a member of the Philippian church) had recently experienced the same feelings, for he too ‘risked his life and nearly died for the sake of the work of Christ’ (2:30). He and Timothy would soon be going to Philippi to encourage the Christians there, and perhaps even to prepare the way for a visit by Paul himself (2:19–30).

At this point, Paul seems to digress and to write about troublemakers who were

operating in Philippi (3:1–4:4). Some have argued that this section was originally a separate letter altogether, though if so it is hard to see why a later editor would have inserted it at such an odd point in Paul's writing. There are plenty of examples of Paul impulsively changing from one topic to another quite unexpectedly, and it is not difficult to imagine that this is what has happened here. The people he writes about are 'those who insist on cutting the body' (3:2), which is code language for circumcizers. Paul does not spell out the reasons for their demand for circumcision, whether it was related to keeping the Law (as in Galatia) or as an ascetic practice (as in Colossae), though the former seems more likely for he replies by reminding them of his own achievements in keeping the Jewish Law (3:1–11). This leads him into reflection on his achievements as a Pharisee, in which he was 'without fault' (3:6) – though he was prepared to reckon all that as 'complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my lord' (3:8). This 'knowledge' consisted not primarily in knowing facts about Jesus, but in enjoying a close personal relationship with him, in which the resurrection life of Jesus himself gave Paul a new and meaningful dynamic for his own daily life: 'All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death' (3:10).

Even so, Paul was not claiming that he had 'arrived' spiritually, as some of his opponents in Corinth and Colossae believed they had. Unlike them, he was still on his way, like a marathon runner moving steadily towards the finishing line, and those who wanted to be spiritually mature should follow his example (3:12–21). Finally, he brought to a close this most joyful of all his letters with advice on a number of varied topics, finishing by reminding his readers that, like him, they could have 'the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives' (4:13), for 'my God will supply all your needs' (4:19).

Timothy and Titus

The New Testament groups 1–2 Timothy and Titus along with Philemon, as all four are addressed to individuals rather than communities. But whereas Philemon is an essentially personal letter these others are addressed more formally to leaders of particular congregations and for that reason they are collectively known as ‘the Pastorals’ or ‘the Pastoral Epistles’. Timothy and Titus both appear elsewhere as Paul’s companions, though they also worked independently: Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus. In both style and content these three letters are quite different from Paul’s other writings, but they are very similar to one another and were probably written at about the same time. They deal with four main subjects.

False teachers

Many of Paul’s letters were written in response to threats from various opponents: Judaizers in Galatia, ascetics in Colossae, and multiple groups in Corinth. Timothy and Titus were facing similar problems and were under pressure to abandon the gospel message as Paul had delivered it to them. This false teaching appears to have included several elements already encountered in earlier letters. The Torah was certainly involved, for some of the troublemakers are identified as ‘converts from Judaism, who rebel and deceive others with their nonsense’ (Titus 1:10). It seems that these people were using the Old Testament to support their own sectarian ambitions, for Timothy is reminded that ‘the Law is good if it is used as it should be used’ (1 Timothy 1:8). The specific argument seems to have been about sex and food, with some claiming that true spiritual enlightenment could only be achieved through a life of asceticism in which embodied existence was denied as far as possible. In contradiction to this, Timothy is urged to remember that ‘Everything that God has created is good; nothing is to be rejected…’ (1 Timothy 4:4).

These people probably had leanings towards a form of Gnosticism with a Jewish tinge, and there is specific mention of ‘the profane talk and foolish arguments of what some people wrongly call “Knowledge” [Greek gnōsis]’ (1 Timothy 6:20). Like the Gnostics of the second century and later, they wanted to deny that this world is really God’s world and so the sooner they could escape from it, the better. Indications that Timothy’s opponents were arguing about ‘myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations’ and had ‘lost their faith in foolish discussions’ also support this identification (1 Timothy 1:4–6, author’s translation). But of course there was more than one way to belittle bodily existence. Asceticism was only one option, and extreme permissiveness was another. At least some of those with whom Timothy was dealing seem to have chosen this alternative (2 Timothy 3:5). For Paul, the gospel had always been about changing lifestyles, not about provoking arguments.

True belief

In response to all this, Timothy and Titus were encouraged to reaffirm the basic elements of true Christian faith, especially by continuing to oppose the idea that God has no concern for the world as we know it. The fact that Jesus himself was both truly human and truly divine clearly contradicted such a notion (1 Timothy 3:14–16). Not only did Jesus come into this world to share God’s love, but he became personally involved with people in their humanity. The essence of salvation therefore is not to be found in philosophical speculation, but in humble acceptance of God’s love and generosity as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Timothy 1:15–17). Those who have their theological priorities right will show it in the way they live, not motivated by making money or empire-building, but by ‘the true words of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Timothy 6:3–10).

Behaviour

This theme crops up throughout these three letters. Several passages spell out in

more detail how Christians ought to behave in relation to the family (1 Timothy 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–5), the church (1 Timothy 5:1–6:2), and the civic authorities (Titus 3:1–7) and in each instance Christian behaviour should reflect the best aspirations of the ancient world, ‘so that no one will speak evil of the message that comes from God’ (Titus 2:5).

Leadership

Given the nature and purpose of these letters, there is much personal advice here for Titus and Timothy about their own conduct. They are to be examples of good behaviour to all whom they serve (1 Timothy 6:11–21; Titus 1:5–9), but they must also have courage to stand firm for the truth (2 Timothy 2:1–26), recognizing that the gospel depends not on personal opinions but on God’s own purposes (2 Timothy 3:10–4:8). They must also ensure that those whom they appoint to serve in leadership capacities in their churches have the same qualities, and are the sort of people whom others can admire (1 Timothy 3:1–13; 4:6–16).

Letters and authors

Most scholars have no difficulty in recognizing Paul as the author of most of the letters that bear his name. In the light of what we know of his life and ministry – not to mention his personal style – it takes little imagination to recognize the furious arguments of Galatians or 1–2 Corinthians as authentic reflections of the sort of things he was passionate about. But in some instances the apparent differences between what we know of Paul and the way particular letters are phrased have suggested that they may not have originated directly with him. This is the case with Ephesians and, to an even greater degree, the Pastoral Letters.

Ephesians

Because Colossians and Ephesians deal with more or less the same topics, it is natural to compare the two letters, and there is no question that the tone of Ephesians is much more serene and settled than what we find in Colossians. Whereas it is easy to create a profile of the sort of individuals with whom Paul engages in Colossians, Ephesians seems to be written independently of any direct involvement with opponents, or indeed any specific readers. Observations of this sort are a flimsy foundation on which to base speculations about authorship, though a number of other arguments can also be presented, which together have been taken to support the suggestion that perhaps Paul himself was not the author of this letter in its present form, though its sentiments are not inconsistent with his known positions on any number of matters.

Language A number of words found in Ephesians are not used elsewhere in Paul's writings. This includes some prominent features, such as the references to 'the heavenly world' (1:3; 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12) which is a key term here but occurs nowhere else.

Style The way Ephesians is constructed is also distinctive. Instead of the unplanned, and largely unrestrained, language of other letters, Ephesians moves from one theme to another in more sedate fashion, generally using more complex sentence structures in the process.

Colossians Ephesians has a close resemblance to Colossians. More than a third of the actual words of Colossians also occur in Ephesians. Since Colossians has more of Paul's impetuous personality about it, many think that must have been the original letter, which was subsequently copied and adapted by the later author of Ephesians.

Doctrine and theology At a number of points Ephesians seems to reflect concerns that are known to have been typical of church life at a period later than the time of Paul. An example would be the use of the term 'church' to describe a universal movement that included all Christians everywhere (e.g. 1:22–23), which is different from Paul's usage, for he generally thought of only local groups of Christians ('the church in Corinth', etc.). Then there is the position of 'apostles and prophets' as 'the foundation stone' of this church (2:20): does this (along with the list of church officers in 4:11) point to a time when church structures were more fully developed? There is also the apparent absence of any reference to the parousia of Jesus, or to the theme of 'justification by faith' which some believe to have been at the heart of Paul's message.

So was Ephesians written not by Paul himself, but perhaps by one of his close friends, or a later admirer who wished to commend Paul's thinking to a wider readership? It has been suggested that Ephesians is a compendium of Paul's teaching, written as a concise introduction to the major themes of his theology, perhaps at a time when his letters were being collected together. The problem with this is that Ephesians is not really a summary of the whole of Paul's teaching at all, and it is precisely the absence of some characteristic themes that has cast doubt on its genuineness as a letter by the apostle himself. The same criticism applies if Ephesians is regarded as a synopsis of Paul's theology.

Many of the arguments put forward against Paul's authorship can be challenged. The close relationship between Colossians and Ephesians really proves nothing, as authors often base one book on something that they have written previously, and Paul had certainly done this before. The relationship between Galatians and Romans is a useful model here, and is in many significant respects similar to the relationship between Colossians and Ephesians as both Romans and Ephesians take up points that had previously been made in the heat of debate, and refine and restate them in a way designed to make them more universally applicable to the concerns of a wider audience. Viewed in this light, many of the alleged theological differences between Ephesians and earlier letters also appear in a different perspective. Nothing in Ephesians actually contradicts previous statements by Paul, and much of it is a logical development of things he had said

elsewhere. So while there is no clear example in other letters of the use of the term ‘church’ to describe all Christians everywhere, the very fact that Paul could apply the same word to believers in Rome, or Corinth, or wherever, implies that there was something they all had in common and which bound them together. Paul certainly had a profound sense of solidarity between the various local Christian communities, as evidenced by the priority he gave to organizing the collection for Jerusalem, and to talk of all these groups together as ‘the church’ would simply give theological expression to that reality.

Many of the other alleged doctrinal discrepancies are not as impressive as they can be made to look. It may be true that the parousia is not found in Ephesians (though it must surely be implied in 4:30 and 5:26–27), but it is not mentioned in Romans either, and no one has ever suggested that was not authentically Pauline. Likewise, the absence of ‘justification by faith’ would only be remarkable if that was indeed the central core of Paul’s thinking, but if (as has been argued in a previous chapter) it only featured in particular situations of controversy, its non-appearance here would mean nothing. In point of fact, one of the major themes of Ephesians is the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians, a topic which almost certainly has a far stronger claim than justification to be the real centre of Paul’s theology.

A factor that is consistently overlooked in all debates about the authenticity of Paul’s letters is the reality that, as far as we can see, they were all composed by ‘Paul and friends’. In many cases these others are actually named, not only as individuals who wrote the actual script but in several instances as joint authors. Recent study of how ancient letters were transmitted to their intended readers has highlighted the importance of performance, by their originators and by those who delivered them to the intended readership (who in reality were not actually readers, but hearers). Given that Paul appears to have worked alongside different people at different times, could it be that what might now be perceived as distinctives are the result of media anachronism on the part of today’s scholars, assuming the sort of consistency of expression that might be valued today but which hardly matches what we know of Paul’s more impulsive way of working? Interestingly, some have claimed to find stylistic similarities between Ephesians and the writings of Luke, so could he have been the one who was responsible for

the final forms of expression in this letter? There is obviously no way of knowing for sure, and the conclusions reached by different scholars on its authorship will tend to reflect their opinions on other subjects, most notably their understanding of Paul's temperament (was he the kind of person to engage in further reflection, or was he an impulsive opportunist thinker?), and their understanding of the part played by pseudonymous writings in early Christianity. Whatever view is adopted, Ephesians represents a significant and mature reflection on some of the key themes in Paul's other letters, and even if it was compiled by a later admirer it accurately captures the feel of Paul in his more reflective moments.

The Pastorals

These three letters are very different from Paul's other letters. They were written not to churches, but to two individuals who were working among recently established Christian communities: Timothy at Ephesus and Titus in Crete. In form, subject matter and style they are very similar to each other but in all these respects they are quite distinct from Paul's other letters. The differences are so striking that a majority of scholars have concluded that, at least in their present form, they could not have been written by Paul himself. Four main points are typically discussed.

Paul's movements

It is difficult to fit the travels of Paul implied or described here into the story of his movements in Acts. Three main explanations have been proposed in the effort to explain the historical references made in these letters.

Paul was released after the imprisonment recorded at the end of Acts.On this view, after his house imprisonment in Rome Paul continued his missionary work for something like two years before returning again to Rome to face death during Nero's persecution. No such release is recorded in Acts, of course, though in principle that is no problem since Luke's purpose was not to write a biographyof Paul but to tell how the Christian message had spread from small beginnings in Jerusalem to the centre of the empire in Rome. The view that Paul was released and carried on further work is found among the early church fathers and is still held today by some scholars. Even within its own frame of reference, however, it cannot solve all the questions, for it is still very difficult to string together all the travel references in the Pastorals to produce any plausible itinerary for

further missionary expeditions.

These letters were second-century writings.On this view, originally popularized in the late nineteenth century, the Pastorals were compiled by people who were trying to reinterpret Paul at a time when he had fallen out of favour with the church. The travel references were not based on actual traditions about Paul's journeys, but were created to give a touch of realism to these letters. The difficulty with this view is that some of the historical references here are hardly the kind of thing that anyone would invent. For instance, 2 Timothy 4:13 contains the instruction, 'When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments' (NRSV).It is hard to imagine that a later self-conscious imitator of Paul would invent such details, for they have no theological content or ideological purpose, nor do they recount anything essential about Paul himself. Comments of this sort are more likely to have originated in some real-life situation.

These letters were compiled from fragments of genuine Pauline letters.Though the letters in their present form were written in the second century by someone who was trying to reassert the authority of Paul in the church, pieces of incidental information such as those just mentioned have a ring of authenticity about them and on this basis it has been proposed that five genuine scraps of Paul's writings can be discovered in 2 Timothy and Titus, and that these were incorporated into a later work by a second-century writer. Insofar as there is anything approaching a consensus on the matter this view is perhaps it, though it has its own difficulties. For example, how or why would five such fragments have survived independently from the time of Paul in the middle of the first century to the time of his imitator almost a hundred years later? What kind of person would have been interested in preserving them, since they contain nothing more than scraps of personal information with no theological teaching or pastoral advice?

Church organization

Attention is often drawn to the fact that the church organization reflected in these letters is more developed than the structures presupposed in Paul's earlier letters. It is certainly true that the Pastorals are much closer to the second-century church with its ruling bishops and complicated organization, albeit in an embryonic form. But other considerations also need to be taken into account.

Paul's earlier letters contain no examples of advice directed specifically towards church leaders, and it is therefore difficult to know what kind of advice he might have given such people, or what level of organization he might have assumed in the early Christian communities. 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 advises about church discipline, which itself implies some structure that was able to take responsibility for it, while much of the debate behind other sections of 1–2 Corinthians related to the claims and counter-claims of people who in some way were jostling for positions of control in the church.

No functions or positions are mentioned in the Pastorals that are not also to be found either in Acts or in Paul's earlier letters.

The position of Timothy and Titus was certainly not that of the later 'monarchical' or ruling bishops. They are, rather, Paul's personal representatives and such authority as they have stems from the fact that he was an apostle, and they had been sent by him.

From time to time it has been suggested that some sort of Gnostic heresy was in view in the Pastoral Epistles, which by definition would make them second-century works. But whatever was going on in the communities depicted here, it was quite different from the developed Gnosticism found in the second century and later, and has many more obvious points of connection with the sort of arguments that surface in 1–2 Corinthians and Colossians.

Doctrinal teaching

The form of teaching in the Pastoral Epistles is definitely distinctive. Apart from a few statements called ‘faithful sayings’ (e.g. 1 Timothy 1:15), there is very little that connects with Paul’s characteristic teaching. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, for example, hardly features here and when it does it seems less related to Paul’s dynamic understanding of the Spirit’s role in directing the day-to-day life of the church and is more integrated with an organizational structure. These are strong reasons for locating the Pastorals in a later stage of church development, though even here things are not as clear cut as they can be made to appear:

Paul’s ‘charismatic’ doctrine has often been portrayed as a free-for-all in the church, with freedom being understood as the opposite of order. But when Paul spoke of the gifts of grace (charismata) in 1 Corinthians 12–14 he clearly meant to imply that there should be recognized ways of doing things in the church. Not every person would be equipped by the Spirit to perform the same work, and this was the basis on which some might be recognized as teachers, others as pastors, and so on. This is a different way of identifying and defining leadership, for people are not appointed to ‘offices’ but recognized by the things they can do well. Nevertheless, while that might be the underlying philosophy of leadership, from an external perspective it was clearly possible in the early days to identify those who were in such positions. Philippians 1:1 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12 show that Paul recognized such people, and according to Acts 14:23 he himself appointed some of them. The fact that they were to be Spirit-directed and empowered did not mean there was no formal or visible order about the way in which they operated.

The role of the Spirit is not entirely institutionalized in the Pastorals. We find here the same emphasis as elsewhere on the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers (2 Timothy 1:14), while Timothy himself is said to have been

appointed as God’s servant by means of prophecy, which was one of the most characteristic ways of the Spirit’s working (1 Timothy 1:18).

Style and vocabulary

The real strength of the suggestion that the Pastorals did not originate with Paul in their present form lies in the style and vocabulary of the letters. There are about 175 words here that are not found in Paul’s other letters, many of which would be more characteristic of Christian writers in the second-century than the first. In addition to these words, there is a difference of style in what might be called the connecting tissue of these letters, in the arrangement of conjunctions, participles and similar grammatical features. This is rather different from Paul’s other letters, and 112 of his favourite prepositions and particles are missing. These facts are impressive, and should not be set aside lightly, though again they are open to more than one interpretation. Some linguistic experts think that the Pastorals are too short to provide enough material for a reliable literary analysis of this kind. In addition, both style and vocabulary are very often affected by the subject matter that is being discussed.

What has emerged from all these debates is that there are differences between the language of the Pastorals and Paul’s earlier letters. Some want to explain them by reference to the different subject matter, to the fact that Paul was now an older man and therefore more reflective, or that the differences derive from the incorporation of traditional statements or quotations from other sources. Others point to the extensive use of editors in the ancient world, and propose that the style of a letter deriving from Paul may have been revised to improve its literary style. Indeed it has been claimed that the style of the Pastorals has many points of similarity with Luke–Acts, and on that basis perhaps Luke could have written them after Paul’s death using rough drafts of original material as a starting point. There is no clear evidence of knowledge of these letters before the second half of the second century, and Marcion did not include them in his canon in the middle of the first century. Observations like that are, of course, open to more than one explanation. But the consensus would be that while there could well be some

genuinely Pauline material in these letters, in their present form they relate to a later period than his lifetime.

CHAPTER 17

PAUL AND HIS MESSAGE

By any standards Paul must have been a remarkable person. He was one of the great visionaries of his age, and his determination to share the Christian message with the whole of the Roman world was surpassed only by his own fervent commitment to following Jesus. As a writer, he was both prolific and perceptive, and his letters have given us an intimate understanding of the joys and trials of life in the earliest Christian communities. But Paul was much more than just a brilliant missionary strategist and a devoted follower of Jesus. He was also one of the church's greatest theologians. His influence was extensive enough during his lifetime, but his writings have inspired many great spiritual movements in every generation since. From Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century to the members of fast-growing churches all around the world today, men and women of many times and places would affirm that Paul's writings have spoken to their own situations in new and challenging ways. Historically, Paul stands second only to Jesus himself as an innovative thinker in the developing life of the early Christian church.

From letters to theology

What then was Paul's understanding of the Christian message? That is an obvious question for today's readers of the New Testament, but it is not one that Paul ever set out to answer in a straightforward way – or, if he did, he left no written account of it. It is of course impossible to read his letters without getting some sense of the things that he regarded as especially important, but the very fact that they are all letters presents its own challenges. There are plenty of ancient examples of the letter style being used as a literary device to convey a message but Paul's writings cannot be regarded as 'literary epistles'. They were not just a neat way of presenting arguments about philosophical or theological questions: without exception they were all real letters, written to real people to deal with real-life situations. If Paul had not come up against the Judaizers in the Galatian churches, there would be no letter to the Galatians with its complicated explanations of the relationship of Christian faith to the Old Testament Law. If there had been no 'parties' in Corinth we would not have the equally important insights of 1 and 2 Corinthians. If Paul had not been involved in these arguments then perhaps Romans would never have been written in the form it is. Moreover, Paul's letters were not the product of reflective thinking carried out behind closed doors in the comfort and relative isolation of a study. They emerged out of his experience as a church pioneer, and their contents inevitably reflect that experience while their form presents its own challenges as it is virtually certain that what we now have is not the full picture. When we sit down to read these texts, that is quite a different experience from those who originally heard them from those trusted intermediaries who not only conveyed them to their recipients but aimed to deliver an experience that would be an authentic substitute for the apostle's own physical presence.

In reading Paul's letters today, we need to be sensitive to all this. Paul never intended them – either separately or all together – to provide a comprehensive account of the Christian faith. He probably never expected anybody to collect them at all, for he generally assumed they would be heard only by those to whom they were addressed. Some were detailed replies to other letters that had been sent to him, letters that no longer exist for us to consult. So reading what

Paul wrote can be like overhearing only part of a conversation. When that happens, it can be possible to grasp the general meaning of what is being said, but unless the one who overhears has a close knowledge of the people who are talking to each other, the details of their conversation will usually remain obscure. If that is the case with people whose lifestyle and general culture are the same as our own then it should be no surprise that it is a complex business to come to a full understanding of a person whose letters reflect conditions in a world that was quite different, and which were delivered as performance rather than being read in silence in the rarefied environment of a library or church study space. To derive any sort of broader insight from occasional letters, we need to give special attention to the context in which they were sent. In Galatians, for example, Paul argues that it is not necessary to be a Jew first in order to be a Christian, whereas virtually none of those who read his letters today would ever have imagined that it might be, and as a result his long arguments about Abraham, Moses, and the Old Testament Law can easily confuse rather than clarify. Even topics that appear to transcend the centuries can pose similar problems. To people today, the word ‘church’ most often suggests a particular style of building, or a religious organization, whereas for Paul the same word meant something altogether different, and referred neither to buildings nor to bureaucratic structures, but to the quality of relationships that could be found among a particular group of people. Nevertheless, the problems are far from insoluble, and in spite of differences of opinion over some of the details, there is a remarkable degree of agreement about the readers and general background of most of Paul’s letters. The full significance of some things that he mentions is bound to remain elusive, but in spite of all this it is not too difficult to identify those elements that formed the central core of Paul’s Christian beliefs.

Back to the Damascus road

The foundation stone of Paul's Christian faith was his experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–18). The events of that day had changed the whole course of his life. We have already seen what that meant for Paul, as he gave himself wholeheartedly to the service of the One whom he met so unexpectedly. This surprise encounter inspired Paul to share with others the living message of Jesus, who had so radically challenged his preconceptions and changed his own life. But his meeting with the risen Jesus was more than just an internal experience that affected his personal behaviour: it was also the source of his thinking as a Christian evangelist and theologian.

When Paul left Jerusalem in pursuit of the Christians who had fled to Damascus, he was by all accounts a convinced Pharisee. He was quite certain that the key to understanding life, God, and the world was to be found in the ancient faith of his people as that was described in their scriptures and interpreted by his own teachers. Paul had no doubt listened attentively to the arguments of people like Stephen, but he believed they were mistaken. The claim that Jesus had in some way superseded the Old Testament – still more the idea that he was alive after his shameful death on the cross – was both incredible and unacceptable. It was because he was convinced that their message was not true that Paul was so energetic in his opposition to the Christians. As far as he was concerned, sticking with the ancient ways, and not following Jesus, was the only way to please God – and Paul was determined to use every means possible to demonstrate the truth of that.

Paul's own understanding of his moral and spiritual achievements seemed to back up his thinking, for he later wrote of how 'I was ahead of most fellow Jews of my age in my practice of the Jewish religion, and was much more devoted to the traditions of our ancestors.… As far as a person can be righteous by obeying the commands of the Law, I was without fault…' (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:6). It has sometimes been supposed that by the time he met the risen Christ Paul was disenchanted with Judaism, but there is no evidence at all for this. On

the contrary, it was an expression of his fierce pride in his religion that first motivated him to persecute the Christians, who to him were undermining the fundamentals of true faith. What followed therefore was totally unexpected. For by the time he reached Damascus, he had changed his mind. As a result of his encounter with the risen Jesus, he knew that he had been wrong, and the Christians were right. It is hard to grasp the full impact that this experience must have had on Paul, but it was natural for him that such a radical about-turn should form the starting point for his subsequent reflections on what it meant to be a Christian. He made that clear in Galatians 1:11–12 when he wrote that 'the gospel I preach is not of human origin. I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ…' (RSV).

It was suggested in chapter 13 that Paul's understanding of the gospel was in all essentials continuous with the message of Jesus, and consistent with the beliefs of those who were Christians before him. But he certainly had an original way of expressing it, and all the most distinctive aspects of his thinking can be traced directly back to his Damascus road experience.

Who is Jesus?

As a Jew and a Pharisee, Paul was looking for the arrival of God's kingdom. Like others of his generation he was praying for the coming of the Messiah who would inaugurate a new age of justice and peace in which God's will would most truly be done. He no doubt shared the common expectation of a Messiah who would be a conquering, all-powerful military leader who would return the land of Israel to the Jewish people and drive out the occupying Roman troops. Paul therefore had no time for Jesus. Despite the great personal claims he had implied and which his followers had made more overtly, the course of events had proved quite conclusively that he was nothing but a discredited and disreputable messianic pretender. The nature of his death only served to underline that, for the Old Testament had declared that anyone suffering such an end would be under a divine curse (Deuteronomy 21:23). But all that was before the Damascus road, where Paul learned not only that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah, but that he was also the 'Son of God'. This discovery had such an impact on his thinking that it was the major subject of his first Christian preaching in Damascus itself (Acts 9:20). When Paul himself later recalled this experience he described it in terms of God's Son 'revealed in me' (Galatians 1:15–16). Before that, he could never have entertained the idea that anyone else could stand alongside God. As a Christian, he still believed in only one God, of course, but from then on he was convinced that the nature of God was most fully disclosed through Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6).

More than that, for throughout his writings he gave to Jesus the title that the Hebrew Bible had reserved exclusively for God: Jesus was now 'the Lord'. Paul emphasized more than once that no one could be a Christian without believing that (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 16:22). That claim was consistent with the beliefs of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem, who had also expressed their convictions in the simple confession that 'Jesus is Lord'. Paul discovered that later, and in one place he quoted an Aramaic slogan that the first believers had used (1 Corinthians 16:22). But for Paul as a Roman citizen the term 'lord' carried other connotations as one of the titles regularly applied to the emperor, and his encounter with the risen Jesus also brought that into question. It was the

imperial forces that had executed Jesus, so if he was truly who Paul now knew him to be, that meant that Caesar's way was wrong. As Paul reflected on all these things, he came to see that Jesus and the empire represented different and incompatible ways of life. On the one hand was Caesar's insistence that peace be imposed through violence, while for Paul the peace of God was rooted in God's justice (dikaiosunē, 'righteousness') and offered freely to all who would embrace it. Paul's thinking on all these things developed over the years, but as far as he was concerned it was on the Damascus road that the essential core values of the gospel were first communicated to him.

What is the gospel?

How had Paul arrived at this point? What had he done to enable God to break into his life in this way? As Paul reflected on such questions, the answer was obvious, and simple: nothing. Paul became a Christian for no other reason than God's loving concern for him, which had led to his unexpected meeting with the risen Jesus (Romans 5:8). On the Damascus road, Paul appreciated that his own salvation depended neither on his ethnic origins as a Jew, nor on his moral achievements. It happened solely because of God's love, something that Paul had never deserved. It was an act of pure generosity or 'grace'. Of course, Paul had done something in response to God's undeserved love. He believed it, and 'belief', or 'faith', became a key concept in Paul's understanding of the Christian life. But what did he mean by that? In Lewis Caroll's Through the Looking-Glass the queen advises that believing needs practice: 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour every day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!' Christian faith has often been caricatured in this way, as something essentially irrational, 'a leap in the dark'. But Paul could never have thought of it like that, for two reasons:

Paul's word 'faith' has nothing at all in common with believing impossible things. The way he uses the word is more like Humpty Dumpty who commented (also in Through the Looking-Glass) that 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' Paul uses words like 'faith' and 'belief' to describe his intuitive response to God's generosity and it is more appropriate therefore to think of 'faith' as 'commitment'.

But it was not commitment in a vacuum, nor was it a purely internal experience. Paul's response to God was based on a holistic perception that undoubtedly began with his mystical encounter with the risen Jesus, but which was also integrated with external realities. There were people in Paul's day who imagined that feelings were the only important criterion of true belief and without for a moment playing down the significance of that, Paul also regarded faith as having

a rational component, most especially the fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1–8).

These then were the key features in Paul's gospel: God's undeserved love and generosity shown to humankind through Jesus, to which the appropriate response was 'faith', which included a commitment to God that was based not on wishful thinking, but on the absolute facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the gift of the Spirit and the inauguration of God's kingdom. This was the message that Paul spread so successfully throughout the Mediterranean world. The origin of his missionary zeal was also related to his conversion, for he discovered that God's grace was not for him only but was to be shared with others, even those who were not originally part of the biblical faith tradition. So without seeking the advice of anyone else, he went off almost immediately to 'Arabia' to share the good news about Jesus with the Gentiles he found there (Galatians 1:15–17).

A social gospel

Just as Paul's new-found faith motivated him to share the good news with others by talking of his own experience, so it also gave him new insights into the nature of human relationships. As his ministry developed, the gospel's impact on such relationships became one of the keynotes of his message. For Paul, commitment was never just a theoretical thing: it must also have some practical outworking in the social and cultural realities of the wider community. Paul had discovered the importance of this shortly after he arrived in Damascus. The Christians there knew he was on his way, and no doubt viewed his arrival with apprehension. But in spite of his reputation, they also received him as a brother in Christ and a friend. The warmth of their reception challenged all Paul's preconceptions. The social fabric of ancient culture in both the Roman and the Jewish context depended for its stability and survival on the maintenance of appropriate boundaries between different groups of people. Consequently, Jews despised Gentiles, Roman citizens had little appreciation for those whom they considered 'barbarians', masters were implacably opposed to slaves – and even in the family it was often taken for granted that men would exploit their women and children. Paul knew that the gospel had the power to change all that, and he intentionally set out to create communities whose life would embody values that challenged the norms of the inherited culture.

If people could be accepted and affirmed by God without any preconditions, then those who were Christians must show the same openness in their relationships with others. This was a major theme of Paul's understanding of the Christian faith and it is no coincidence that he could summarize the message of one of his major letters in social terms: 'there is no longer Jews or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28, NRSV). Through reflection on that, Paul evolved his distinctive understanding of the nature of the Christian community as a subversive alternative to the life of the empire. It took him some time to work through all its ramifications, but the centrality of this notion itself was something that Paul first learned on the Damascus road and in what happened immediately after that.

What about the Law?

The relevance of the Jewish Law for Christian believers is a major subject in many of Paul's letters. As a faithful believer Paul acknowledged that careful observance of the Law was an integral part of a true response to God's love. It was because of his loyalty to the Law that he found it so difficult to believe that a crucified Jesus could be the Messiah (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13) and his journey to Damascus was motivated only by his passionate commitment to the Law. His opposition to the followers of Jesus was based not on personal animosity but was provoked by a determination to uphold what he knew to be God's standards. So when Paul encountered the risen Christ and discovered that he was wrong, a large question mark was placed against the whole structure of his inherited spirituality. From that moment onwards, he knew that his traditional understanding of the Law was not now the way to please God, because in the very act of keeping it most meticulously Paul had clearly found himself on the opposite side to God! Paul's Christian life began with the realization that the way to please God was through Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, and that was going to require a considerable readjustment in the way he regarded his inherited traditions. It might even be possible to observe the Law in ways that were contrary to the will of God!

Living the Christian life

How then was the Christian life to be lived? Quite simply, said Paul: not by keeping law (of any sort, Jewish or other), but by following Jesus. Paul's spiritual orientation was no longer determined by institutional religion but by a living connection to the risen Jesus. This was such a major shift in Paul's self-understanding that he could write of it as a crucifixion and resurrection: a point at which all that he had previously valued became meaningless in the face of his encounter with the God who surprised him by infusing his life with the power to be the kind of person that in his heart he had always most wanted to be.

This was not just a theoretical notion for Paul. Everywhere in his letters he makes it plain that he had an intense awareness of the mystical power and presence of the living Jesus working in his life to give him victory over failure and to renew his personality. In describing his life-changing encounter he wrote that 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20, NRSV), and he frequently described the Christian life as a life 'in Christ' (2 Corinthians 12:2). It was by being 'in Christ' that a person could effectively 'die' to a life of defeat and frustration and receive the power of a new life. Being 'in Christ' meant that the Christian was filled by Christ, so that at every point the believer could say 'to me to live is Christ… [to] know him and the power of his resurrection' (Philippians 1:21; 3:10, RSV). Paul used this language in a very literal sense. Christians were intended to 'become like [God's] Son' (Romans 8:29). Jesus himself had been the only one ever to do God's will perfectly, and Christians could now do the same by the presence of the risen Christ living within them. The way this would happen was by the operation of the Holy Spirit, one of whose tasks was to enable Christians to be like Jesus. This too was a lesson Paul learned in the moment of his conversion. Looking back to it some time later, he wrote: 'All of us, then, reflect the glory of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same glory, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into God's likeness in an ever greater degree of glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Explaining the faith

Paul’s conversion gave him a new understanding of the relationship between people and God. But Paul was a great thinker, and he soon needed to explain these new beliefs in relation to other aspects of his life. What exactly was it that happened to him on the Damascus road, and what did it all mean? To answer those questions, Paul naturally began with his own roots in Judaism. If the Jewish scriptures were truly God’s word, then how could they be understood in the light of what God was now doing through Jesus? That was an important question for Paul and for other Jews who embraced Jesus as Messiah. But as he took his message into the wider Gentile world, the same questions needed to be answered in other ways to engage with the social and moral concerns of Roman culture. Paul’s thinking on both these matters is clearly reflected in his letters.

The Hebrew scriptures

The Old Testament must have been Paul's biggest headache. Starting from the Damascus road, he knew that through Jesus as Messiah God had accepted him and changed his life, and had asked only for Paul's wholehearted commitment in return. But the Old Testament had always included obedience to the Law as an integral part of what it meant to please God. So if Jesus was God's Son and the Torah was God's Law there was some kind of contradiction here that would need to be resolved. Working out how to address that was a big question not only for Paul but for every other faithful Jewish believer who became a Christian. It was one of the most urgent issues in the life of the early church, which explains why so many of Paul's letters are concerned with it. In looking at Galatians and Romans, we have already paid brief attention to how Paul dealt with it.

In effect, he argued that the traditional view and his new Christian understanding were both true, but not at the same time as each other. The Old Testament was God's word, and Jesus was God's Son. But the Old Testament was only a temporary word from God, 'our custodian until Christ came, in order that we might then be put right with God through faith' (Galatians 3:24). God's gracious love, accepted in faith, had always been the real basis of salvation, as far back as the time of Abraham himself (Galatians 3:6–9). Human experience had shown that even scrupulous law-keeping could not deliver people from guilt – but Jesus could, and did (Galatians 3:10–12). How then did he do it? This further question led Paul to the central facts of Jesus' whole existence: the cross and resurrection. The cross was always at the heart of Paul's preaching, because for him it explained the relationship between Christian faith and the Law (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5). To be in the right with God, a person must be a part of the covenant family of Abraham, the sign of which was observance of the Law. Human experience, however, showed that religious observance by itself – whatever the theological explanation behind it – did not always produce a sense of well-being in the human spirit. In spite of all his claims to near-perfection, Paul himself was not flawless, and as he thought honestly about the kind of person he was he realized that he was not the kind of person he wished to be. It was this 'curse' of human failure that Jesus negated by his death on the cross, and his subsequent

resurrection made the benefits of new life available to any who would respond to God's generous love (Galatians 3:13–14). Paul never offered any detailed explanation of the way in which this could happen, and if pressed he would probably have said that it defied logical explanation, for it was his own experience that had ultimately convinced him of its truth.

The world of experience

Such arguments made sense to people who were steeped in the Hebrew tradition. But Paul took the Christian message to non-Jewish people, and for them there were more appropriate ways of explaining the impact of Jesus' coming. In doing so Paul began from a notion that was familiar to both Jews and Gentiles. Our present experience of life is not the only one possible, he said. Certainly it is not a total presentation of the ultimate truth about the world, and God, and people. We have already come across one version of this idea in the beliefs of the Gnostics, for whom reality was understood through drawing a distinction between two worlds: the material world where we live now, and the spiritual world where God is. On this view, salvation consisted in escaping from the one to the other. Paul sometimes used their language, but his conceptual framework was provided by a more traditional Jewish idea of 'two ages'. These 'two ages' are mentioned in many Jewish apocalyptic writings as well as the teachings of some rabbis. But the distinction between them was an ethical one, and not a cosmological or metaphysical one like the two worlds of the Gnostics. Jewish thinkers had contrasted life in 'this age' with all its unsatisfactory outcomes with life in 'the age to come' which would be characterized by peace and fulfilment, under the personal direction either of God or the Messiah. Paul adopted this understanding as a starting point to explain the difference between life according to the empire and life as God intended it to be.

Roman society had its own imperial theology, which can be stated simply as: the emperor was divine, his duty was to establish and maintain the peace, and he did this through military means. This is the life of 'this age', with all its brokenness and exploitation, and from one perspective Christians cannot escape from 'this present evil age' (Galatians 1:4) because all humanity is bound up with the political and social systems that sustain this way of thinking. But alongside that, the Christian gospel presented an alternative possibility. Jesus himself had spoken of the arrival of God's kingdom, offering the potential for doing things God's way and reflecting rather different values and standards. This was the way to create a society whose standards would be the opposite of those which seem to characterize the world as it is now: '… to bring good news to the poor… to

proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed…' (Luke 4:18–19). In other words, the way to real peace is through the establishment of justice for all, expressed in the first instance through God's love and generosity extended to all. All this was good Jewish thinking, but Paul's new Christian perspective enabled him to see it in a different light. 'The age to come', or 'kingdom of God' had traditionally been regarded as something in the future, perhaps a far distant future. But Jesus announced its arrival and claimed it was present in his own life and ministry for he himself was the Messiah and Son of God. He told his disciples that 'there are some here who will not die until they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power' (Mark 9:1), and as the earliest Christians looked back at Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they were certain that this promise had indeed come true. Paul agreed with them. Though he did not typically use the terminology of 'kingdom of God', he was deeply conscious of the fact that becoming a Christian meant the transfer of one's allegiance from the standards of the fallen world to the values of God's new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 1:13–14). Or, put another way, Christians are 'citizens of heaven' (Philippians 3:20).

To be sure, Christians still live in the world that is dominated by insecurities and exploitation. But the prevailing influence in their lives must be the values of God's kingdom, and their behaviour should reflect this. This formed the basis of Paul's ethical advice to his readers when he advised 'Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God…' (Romans 12:2). That did not imply that Christians were already perfect. Like Jesus before him, Paul maintained an eschatological tension between the present operation of God's sovereignty in the lives of Christian people and its full and final unveiling at some point in the future. But the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians represented the invasion of this world by God's kingdom – and meant that Christians should live accordingly. Jesus had spelled out the implications of this both in his teaching and by his way of life. Paul expected his readers to do the same (Galatians 5:16, 22–23). He also believed that God's standards of justice and generosity must apply to the corporate life of society as well as to personal morality, and this is why he could declare so boldly that the barriers of the fallen world were meaningless in the context of God's new creation (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:11–22).

Paul knew well enough that the Christian life would therefore be a life of constant tension, in which the values of the imperfect world would be seeking to obliterate the standards of God's new creation (Romans 7:14–25). He also knew that the Romans would see this as deeply subversive as it challenged the very structure of the empire. He also believed that a subversive lifestyle was not an optional extra but was intrinsic to faithful Christian discipleship. If Christian baptism meant anything, it must represent a radical change of moral and spiritual perspective (Romans 6:1–4) in which the old ways were abandoned and believers experienced the empowerment of the Spirit to live by the values of the 'age to come' (Galatians 5:25). Paul also expanded the traditional 'two worlds' scheme by suggesting that human experience really encompasses not two worlds, but three. Unlike some of his fellow rabbis, Paul was well aware that the behaviour of people outside the orbit of Judaism could on occasion reflect God's will. Many Jews wrote off the Gentiles as being quite incapable of pleasing God, but having been brought up in the Hellenistic world Paul knew this was wide of the mark. Greek and Roman moralists at their best had expressed the highest ideals, some of them apparently similar to the principles announced by Jesus himself.

Why is it that secularists regularly share the same ideals and values as Christians? Paul found the answer by referring back to the Old Testament's teaching that all people are created 'in God's image' (Genesis 1:27), one implication of which is that to be human automatically gives a person a built-in capacity for understanding God's will. Of course, in an imperfect world that capacity has been diminished by the impact of evil. But in spite of that, people do instinctively know the difference between right and wrong, whether alerted to it by conscience or by some other internal moral mechanism. This has often been referred to as the 'natural law' or 'common grace' and it undoubtedly played an important part in Paul's thinking (Romans 1:18–2:16). It enabled him to explain the relationship between the world as God originally intended it to be, the world in its corrupted state as we all know it, and the new creation that God has inaugurated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians understand the character of God's kingdom because they themselves are a part of it, while those who have not yet discovered Jesus have a dimmer view of God's standards because they are a part of the fallen world, with its tendency to prevent

people from actually carrying out God’s will.

Paul has often been criticized for being narrow-minded and introspective. Some of his greatest admirers have been both, but nothing could be further from the truth so far as Paul himself is concerned. He had a most comprehensive definition of the meaning of Christian salvation in which the whole world – indeed, the whole cosmos – was the stage on which the drama of redemption was to be played out. Personal and individual salvation was important, but could never be separated from cultural and environmental salvation. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was the hinge on which the whole of world history turned, the beginning of God’s new creation. Like Jesus, Paul looked to a future time when God’s kingdom would arrive in its fullness. But Paul never saw the Christian faith as merely a hope for a better future. On the Damascus road he had experienced the renewing power of God’s generous Spirit at work in his own life, and he saw all those who committed themselves to Jesus as a channel through which the life of God’s kingdom can undermine and challenge life as we know it in the present broken world. Through the behaviour of such ‘kingdom people’ God can demonstrate the meaning of the true freedom for which both the physical world and its people are crying out (Romans 8:18–25). Christians must show this by the way they handle the world of plants and animals, as well as in their own personal spirituality. But for Paul, the greatest opportunity for demonstrating the reality of what life might be like when things were done God’s way was through the new relationships which came into being in the church.

Paul on death

Paul's thinking was dominated by eschatology, just as the teaching of Jesus had been before him. Jesus and Paul both declared that the kingdom of God, for which devoted Jews had long been waiting, had now arrived. Because of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – and, more particularly, his own encounter with the living Christ on the Damascus road – Paul was certain that the future had now burst into the present, and Christians were truly living in God's kingdom despite still being a part of the fallen world which so desperately needed salvation. So is the present spiritual experience of Christians the only thing that really matters? That was the obvious conclusion reached by some members of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:6, 15:12). It seemed to be the logical outcome of Paul's own teaching, for he had already written of the Christian life as a sort of 'resurrection' (Galatians 2:20). But Paul was unhappy with this idea, and went to great lengths to show why he thought it was mistaken. The present experience of Christians, he claimed, is but a foretaste of the much greater glory that will transform everything when God's kingdom is established in its fullness. Like Jesus, Paul declared the new age to be inaugurated, but not yet fully perfected, which meant his faith must always have a future goal as well as an immediate objective. For Paul, the future meant the return of Jesus himself in glory (the parousia), and the transformation of Christians finally and fully to be like Christ (Philippians 3:20–21). It has sometimes been suggested that all this was no more than an unhelpful hangover from Paul's Jewish past, and that in any case he eventually abandoned such a view. It is certainly true that Paul seems to have retained enough of his Pharisaic theology at this point for him to have been able to use the fact to his own advantage when the opportunity arose (Acts 23:6–9; 26:6–8). But the resemblance was limited to the bare fact that both Paul and the Pharisees (as distinct from Sadducees and Greeks) believed that death would be followed by a future life that would in some way include resurrection. In fact, Paul's view of God's kingdom as present-but-still-to-come followed Jesus' own teaching very closely, and belief in a life after death was a necessary and logical outcome of that.

But did Paul's view change as he got older? In view of the intensity of Paul's ministry, it is unlikely that his thinking remained absolutely static throughout his Christian life and so in principle we can expect to find variations in his letters. Some, however, have claimed to be able to detect at this point not simply the natural changes of growing maturity but quite striking contradictions in his thoughts on Christians and physical death. It has been argued that in the beginning Paul held a fervently apocalyptic view, and expected all Christians to live until the parousia of Jesus which was going to happen more or less imminently. This expectation was challenged by events in Thessalonica where some Christians had died, and in response to that Paul declared they would be raised to life at the parousia (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Subsequently he added that the living would also be transformed at the same instant (1 Corinthians 15:51–54) but then only a short time later he described this transformation as a gradual change, beginning with conversion and ending with death, which would lead directly into a new existence in a 'spiritual body' without the need for the parousia to come first (2 Corinthians 3:17–18; 4:16–5:4). Paul had therefore moved from an original unrefined Jewish view to a more sophisticated position that owed a lot to the influence of Greek philosophy.

This understanding of Paul's statements draws attention to some important features of his thinking, though it cannot be accepted without qualification:

The Damascus road experience challenged all Paul's traditional beliefs and that must have included whatever he inherited from apocalyptic speculations about the future. No doubt he used familiar concepts from his past to explain his new Christian faith, but we have no evidence to suggest that such concepts were unaltered by his new perspective.

In dealing with the fate of the dead in 1 Thessalonians, Paul certainly identified himself with those who would be alive at the time of theparousia. But the fact that Paul (like Jesus, Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39) added that theparousiawould come 'as a thief comes at night' (by definition, unknowable) hardly suggests that

he had some kind of detailed timetable in his mind (1 Thessalonians 5:1–11). We should also remember that when Jewish people discussed the future, central themes were often described as ‘near’ to emphasize their importance rather than to make chronological predictions.

It is in any case inaccurate to assert that Paul lost his belief in a direct future intervention by God, and viewed the life of the new age in purely individual and spiritual terms. In Philippians he could still write of Christians dying in terms similar to those of 1 Corinthians (Philippians 3:20–21), while at the same time retaining a clear expectation of theparousia(Philippians 4:5).

How then can we understand this apparent divergence in Paul’s statements about death? Two factors are worth noting:

Paul certainly continued to think creatively about this question when once it had been raised, and we can expect to see the evidence of that in his letters. The passage of time brings change in the way most people contemplate their own death, and in addition Paul seems to suggest that he received fresh revelations about the subject from Christ himself (1 Corinthians 15:51–57).

Between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul had an experience which shook him more than most. We do not know what it was, but he writes of feeling that ‘the death sentence had been passed on us’ (2 Corinthians 1:9). If he was literally sentenced to death, then questions about life after death would inevitably become more urgent – hence his more detailed teaching on the subject in 2 Corinthians 5.

Paul’s thinking never changed on the basic issues. He remained convinced that the coming of the new age was not just an internal experience in the lives of

Christian people, but something that would come in power, as God transformed not only the world of people but the world of nature too. And since Jesus was God's Son and Messiah, this great 'day of the Lord' must also be the day of Jesus' return in glory.

What is the church?

A typical dictionary entry defines a church as ‘a building for Christian worship’. Such places are familiar features of the landscape of cities around the world. Some are splendid and ornate, others are plain and simple. The church today might also be understood as an organization, indeed a whole series of organizations, for there are thousands of different ‘churches’ or Christian denominations throughout the world. Paul would find all this very mystifying, for to him ‘the church’ was neither a building nor a sect. When he used the word ‘church’ he was thinking of people – God’s people, followers of Jesus, who were showing by their lifestyle that they were a part of the kingdom of God which Jesus had first announced and which Paul believed had now arrived. ‘The church’ was therefore not something dreamed up by human imagination but was the work of God, founded on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit had breathed new life into a group of disillusioned disciples. Paul himself had shared in that experience on the Damascus road. His encounter with the risen Jesus brought a consciousness of a new relationship to God but it also introduced him to a new community of love and joy as he found himself part of a large group of Jesus’ followers: the church.

Theologically, he thought of the church as a microcosm of the transformation that God’s new order offered to the whole world. To be in the church was to have a foretaste of life in God’s kingdom. Socially, the church in the Roman empire was an alternative society, based not on violence, greed, and exploitation but on the new freedom and fellowship that Jesus had announced: freedom to love God, and to love and serve others by sharing in God’s generosity (Mark 12:29–31). Jesus had always resisted the temptation to depict God’s kingdom as merely a promise of better things to come in the future. From the very start of his ministry he declared that it was here now, and offered the prospect of renewed lives in the present (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus put this into practice. His own interactions with people demonstrated the reality of God’s power to break down the barriers that so often mar human relationships, and the earliest disciples in Jerusalem followed his example.

A major reason for the phenomenal growth rate of the early church was the simple fact that the Christian communities offered a plausible alternative way of life that had the power to fulfil the deepest aspirations of the human heart. When people asked for proof that God's new way of doing things had truly arrived, Paul and the other apostles could point to the church. Life in the church was indeed a new way of being in which folk of diverse social, racial and religious backgrounds had been brought together in a new and radical friendship. Their whole style of living was totally transformed, and to the honest observer there could be no doubt that something of world-changing proportions had taken place. As men and women committed their lives to Jesus Christ, they found they were set free to serve God, and incorporated into a new relationship with others who shared their commitment. Paul had discovered this at the start of his own Christian life. When he arrived in Damascus after his encounter with the risen Jesus, he found himself embraced within a new community of love and trust alongside the very people whom he had sworn to outlaw. After his baptism Paul spent some time with the Christians in Damascus, and realized that the Christian gospel had within it the power to transform relationships. When he later wrote to the churches in Galatia, he emphasized that faith in Christ should lead to reconciliation among people as well as peace with God (Galatians 3:28–29). He could be certain of that only because he had experienced it in his own life, as the ignorant and uneducated people whom he had been determined to hound to death now became his closest friends and spiritual companions.

The body of Christ

One of Paul's favourite terms to describe the church is 'the body of Christ'. Sometimes it refers to a particular local group of Christians (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:3–8) while at other times it can refer to the sum total of all Christians throughout the world (Ephesians 1:22–23) and in yet other places Paul seems to have both in mind (Colossians 2:18–19; Ephesians 4:12–16). His readers would not be surprised to find Paul employing this language to describe particular communities of people as the Stoics had often used similar concepts. For them, the universe itself could be thought of as a 'body', characterized by a great diversity in its various parts and yet all of it working together in harmony, sometimes directed by a supreme deity as its 'head'. Others had written of the ideal democracy in the same terms, envisaging a community that could affirm the diversity of individuals who were its citizens while enabling them all to work together for the common good. When Paul wrote of the church as 'the body of Christ' he was therefore using imagery that many readers would already understand. But it was not the Stoics who had taught him to think of the Christian church in this way. As with other dominant aspects of his thinking, this too was a lesson Paul first learned at the time of his conversion. The voice on the Damascus road had asked 'Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14). The 'me' was none other than Jesus himself, and Paul was taken aback to learn that in persecuting Christians he was also persecuting Jesus. But he was, and to injure Christians was to afflict their Lord, for they were 'the body of Christ', living extensions of his personality and influence wherever they went.

One of Paul's most comprehensive explanations of all this is found in his correspondence with the church at Corinth. The precise terms in which the subject is expounded naturally owe a good deal to the specific questions which he was seeking to address in that context. But we have no reason to suppose that his thinking would have been any different in another less contentious context. The idea that Christians are a part of 'the body of Christ' must have been a fundamental element in Paul's initial communication of the Christian message, for that is what the Corinthians were arguing about. Paul had spoken to them of 'the body of Christ' – but what exactly did he mean by it, and how should

Christians behave in order to demonstrate the new freedom that Paul declared they had within the fellowship of ‘the body’? One of the problems in Corinth was a misunderstanding of the nature of true freedom. ‘If Christ has set us free,’ some were saying, ‘then we must be free to do as we please, unrestricted by the inhibitions and hang-ups of others.’ As a result, the life of that particular Christian community had come to be dominated by selfishness and discord rather than the mutual sharing and harmony that were the real signs of the presence of the new age. Their regular gatherings were dominated by individuals and small groups who insisted on doing as they pleased. This was a particular problem in Corinth, where the church included people from diverse social circumstances. In everyday life, rich and poor mingled quite naturally, as the large villas of business people typically had shops or workshops attached to them, as also did the tenements of poorer neighbourhoods. But in social settings such as church gatherings, the cultural hierarchies persisted. Some arrived earlier than others and started eating right away (1 Corinthians 11:33), and even then the serving of different sorts of food to different people was hardly a mark of social cohesion (1 Corinthians 11:17–22). None of this would have been exceptional by the social standards of the day but it meant that, far from subverting the cultural norms church gatherings were actually perpetuating them. The same social distinctions almost certainly lie behind other issues contentious in Corinth such as food offered to idols and the matter of believers taking one another to court (both options that would predominantly have been available to the upper classes). Such social divisions had even intruded into their worship as those with the ability to do relatively spectacular things like speaking in tongues insisted on their right to do so, even when it rendered the proceedings meaningless for everyone else (1 Corinthians 14:1–4).

There was no way in which Paul could accept all this as a true reflection of his own understanding of Christian community. The church at Corinth had become a denial of the gospel. Its worship was often incomprehensible, with meetings that Paul said ‘actually do more harm than good’ (1 Corinthians 11:17). Its evangelism was ineffective, for such behaviour merely made the church a laughing stock to ordinary people (1 Corinthians 14:23). Paul challenged all this by affirming what the Corinthians had got right and rebuking them about those things on which he believed them to be mistaken. In the process he provided a unique insight into some of the more distinctive aspects of his own thinking.

Life in the body

The Corinthian church had asked Paul about the function of the charismata, or ‘gifts of grace’, and it is in the process of answering their question that he explains his understanding of how Christians should relate to one another in the life of the local church (1 Corinthians 12:1–31). In doing so he uses the image of the body in its simplest possible form. Even with our more sophisticated understanding of physiology, it is not difficult to see the way Paul’s mind worked. He imagines the human body as a complex organism, with parts of different size, shape, and constitution, all required to work together in different locations and in different ways to ensure the smooth operation of the whole. A body without an ear or an eye would be impaired, just as would a body with no hands or feet. To ask whether a hand is more attractive or more important than an eye is an absurd question, for both are essential as they are if the human body is to work properly. The unity within diversity that is the key to health in the human body is also a fundamental requirement for proper relationships in the church. Individual Christians are comparable to ears, or hands, or feet, or whatever. They might all be different personalities but they are all vital parts of the whole, and if they are not working properly then the corporate life of the church will be impaired.

This simple imagery introduces us to four decisive aspects of Paul’s thinking on the church and its members.

All members are indispensable

In Paul’s understanding of the church and its operations, everyone has a part to play. When Christians meet together for worship or fellowship, they all have something to offer and should be given the opportunity to do so (1 Corinthians 14:26–33). This was the exact opposite of how things worked in the highly structured context of Roman society, though the Greek ideal of the city state had

always emphasized the importance of every citizen's voice being heard. Since Paul regarded the church as a subversive presence it is not surprising that he took a different approach. In his view, if every Christian was empowered by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9), and if the church was the sphere in which God's Spirit was working to demonstrate the reality of God's way of doing things, then it was only logical to suppose that all Christians should have a part to play in the life of the church. As a result, Paul asserts that every Christian has their own distinctive charisma, a ministry that is not restricted by ordination or some other special experience but which is given to all by the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers (1 Corinthians 12:7).

All members are different

Paul affirms in the strongest possible terms that while the Spirit's work is transformational, this never overrides or obliterates individual personalities and capacities. This comes out quite clearly in his description of the various functions that different people may carry out in order to enhance the life and spiritual development of the church. The list in 1 Corinthians 12:4–28 is by no means exhaustive, and no doubt was determined by the nature of the arguments that were going on in Corinth, for elsewhere Paul lists rather different functions as being 'gifts from the Holy Spirit' (Romans 12:6–21).

All members are equal

Individual Christians may not be identical in either personality or ability, but all are equally important. Those who speak in tongues or who teach may seem more indispensable, but they are not – and if some wish to have other functions than what they have, they should remember that all these abilities depend solely on the generosity of God. Any attempt to try and obtain particular gifts for themselves will undermine the core values of the community, because true spiritual freedom is grounded in mutual trust and respect among members and dependence on the work of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:27–31).

All members are responsible

Paul's concept of the church is dynamic, not static. He does not think of it as an organization that holds meetings but as an outpost of God's ways of doing things (the 'kingdom'). This means that Christians do not 'go to church' – on the contrary, they are the church, wherever they are and whatever they happen to be doing. Their responsibility for the condition of the Christian community does not end while they are at work or at home, for everything that happens to them has its effect on the whole body. This is true of the human body, of course: an injury to one part will inevitably bring discomfort, or worse, to the whole organism. Paul's Damascus road experience taught him that when one Christian suffers, the whole church is injured. But the opposite is also true: 'if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness' (1 Corinthians 12:26). Paul would have been mystified by the modern concept of 'joining the church' which only makes sense where discipleship is defined in terms of enrolling in a particular sort of organization. For Paul the church was not a club that could be joined or left: it was a commitment to a way of being, and therefore could be thought of as a living organism, in which Christians were inescapably related to and responsible for one another because of their new relationship with God through Christ.

Leadership in the body

No matter what the theory may be, every social grouping needs adequate leadership, and the church is no exception. How then did Paul cope with the need for competent leaders, while still retaining the flexibility and freedom that forms the bedrock for his thinking about the church? It is clear that Paul never imagined the church could do without proper leadership. According to Acts it was his regular practice to appoint leaders wherever he established a Christian community (Acts 14:23; 20:17–35), and that is confirmed by references in his letters to 'the bishops and deacons' at Philippi (Philippians 1:1, NRSV) and to 'those who… are over you' in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:12, RSV). Moreover, Paul believed that he had himself a special position by virtue of being an apostle (Galatians 1:15–19; 2 Corinthians 11), and he recognized the God-given authority of others in similar positions (Acts 15:4; Romans 16:1–15). The really distinctive element in Paul's thinking was the model of leadership that he adopted to explain the functions of these different people. In later centuries the church took over the institutional structures of the Roman empire, and when the empire collapsed the church also inherited over many of its social functions throughout Europe. In spite of many upheavals in church history, that has remained the dominant organizational model, amended a little in recent decades by the incorporation of organizational strategies derived from business management and marketing. Though the theological explanations vary, all contemporary churches operates like this, with authority passed on through different levels of power with accompanying rituals to ensure the survival of the system. In Paul's charismatic model, however, leadership looked very different. The word 'charismatic' is generally used in a very narrow way today, referring primarily to glossolalia and other 'charismatic gifts', but Paul used it somewhat differently. For him, a 'charismatic gift' was not primarily a matter of individualistic spirituality: it was a gift offered by God to the entire faith community, and which had far-reaching repercussions for the whole of its life and relationships. On this model the centre of authority is to be found outside the members of the church altogether, and rests with God working through the Holy Spirit. Those who lead are not those who have been appointed to an office by a vote of the congregation, or indeed by their predecessors in office, but those who have been equipped with leadership skills by a personal endowment from God and whose gifts the other members of the body have recognized. Since God's

choice depends on nothing other than the freely given gifts of grace, every single Christian could potentially be the recipient of leadership functions. Several statements made by Paul in writing to Corinth help to explain this concept further.

The head of the body

A good deal of debate has been generated by the fact that in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul does not differentiate between the whole body and its head whereas in later letters Christ becomes 'the head… from whom the whole body… makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love' (Ephesians 4:15–16, RSV). But even in Corinthians he never thought of Christ as just the sum total of all Christians, for there he affirms that the whole basis of the church's existence is the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' (12:3) and in another passage, using a different metaphor, he describes him as 'the one and only foundation' of the church (3:11). The church does not belong to people, not even to its members. It belongs to God, and Christ is its head: Christ alone is its true leader, and the ultimate authority belongs to him.

Led by the Spirit

This is why Paul can expect things to happen 'in a proper and orderly way' even without a structured hierarchical leadership to enforce rules and regulations (1 Corinthians 14:40). If all Christians are guided by the Spirit, he reasons, and if it is God's will that 'harmony and peace' should be the hallmarks of the church (1 Corinthians 14:33) then God will not only equip Christians for different ministries, but will also give others the grace to recognize and accept such Spirit-inspired leadership where it emerges. Experience suggests that this is perhaps a counsel of perfection. People certainly find it difficult to cope with such open structures, and at the very least it demands extraordinary sensitivity and personal discipline. But Paul simply observed that for people whose lives had been transformed by the Spirit of God that should be no problem!

Partners in ministry

One reason for Paul's optimistic expectations at this point is the fact that he never supposed just one person would emerge as the sole leader of any given congregation. Though Ephesians 4:11 mentions the callings of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastors, and teachers this was never intended as a prescriptive list of ministries and in other contexts he could identify different skills (1 Corinthians 12:27–31). He never for a moment imagined that only some uniquely qualified individuals could enjoy the gifts of God's Spirit. On the contrary, it would take the whole church fully to express the greatness of God and the only thing that determined a person's function in the church was the endowment of the Spirit, which was available to all in equal measure and whose manifestations were as diverse as humanity itself. In God's new society gender, race, and social class – all barriers of the corrupted world – were not only irrelevant but were to be actively dismantled.

This is Paul at his most radical, which no doubt explains why subsequent generations of Christians have found it convenient to disconnect his understanding of personal salvation from his thinking on the nature and operation of the church. Yet for Paul the two were inseparable. The heart of the gospel was freedom: freedom from guilt, freedom from shame, freedom from law, and freedom from everything that might prevent people from becoming what God intended for them. To be set free by Christ was to be released into a new world in which people could find their own true identity, relating to each other on a new paradigm because they were related to Christ himself. The total transformation of all things might still be in the future, when 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' is fully realized (Romans 8:18–25), but in the meantime the church stands as a testimony to that future hope, and as the context in which people can serve one another most truly as they love and serve God.

Paul and inclusivity

In various forms, ‘justice’ (dikaiosunē, ‘righteousness’) is central to Paul’s gospel. It features prominently in all his major letters, whether he is dealing with the nature of salvation (as in Galatians and Romans) or with its practical outworking in the Christian community (as in 1–2 Corinthians). But was Paul really committed to establishing a just society, or was it all talk and no action? In Galatians, he asserts quite categorically that a true understanding of God’s justice meant the dismantling of the major social divisions of the ancient world. Prejudice and discrimination based on race, social class, and gender were quite incompatible with the Christian gospel (Galatians 3:28). Yet when we look elsewhere, especially where Paul gives practical advice to his readers, his instructions do not always seem to be consistent with his general statements of policy. This is especially true of his statements about the place of women in the church and his handling of the issue of slavery. To set these in their proper perspective, we must place them alongside his attitude to racial issues.

Racism

Some interpreters argue that when Paul talks about equality he is referring to an internal spiritual disposition rather than anything with social implications, and that Galatians 3:28 concerns the way God sees people rather than how people ought to view one another. This is unlikely to be Paul's meaning if only because elsewhere he insists that Christian faith should never be segregated from the rest of life but ought to determine the lifestyle of believers. In relation to the racial issue, he was determined that ethnic prejudices would have no part in the Christian community. He was almost obsessive in his desire to bring Jews and Gentiles together and was even prepared to disagree publicly with Peter over it (Galatians 2:11–14). It was also the immediate cause of his final arrest and transportation to Rome (Acts 21:17–36). Given the strenuous efforts he made to oppose racist attitudes wherever he found them, it makes no sense to imagine that Paul thought racism would be abolished only in some ideal world, and the most natural reading of this passage in Galatians is therefore to assume he also intended to work for the equality of women and men, and regarded slavery in the same light.

Women and men

Many of Paul's statements about the place of women and men in the church's life bear this out. In describing the various 'gifts of grace' in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, he never suggests that these endowments are only for men, and in principle all positions in the Pauline church were open to all Christians, regardless of gender. Paul himself regularly worked alongside women and his most extensive list of greetings to Christian leaders includes many women (Romans 16:1–15), at least one of whom he calls an 'apostle' (Junia, Romans 16:7) while another (Phoebe) was the authorized bearer of his letter to Rome, a duty that included the expectation that she would be the one who not only delivered it in oral performance but was also empowered to answer questions about it as his personal representative. Furthermore, in advising the Corinthians about appropriate behaviour he takes it for granted that both men and women will 'pray and prophesy' in public worship (1 Corinthians 11:4–5) – and even reminds them that he had delivered 'traditions' to that effect as part of his initial teaching to them, in much the same way as he had passed on information about the resurrection (1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:1–8 – using the same Greek words in each case).

The same is true in his discussion of marriage. Some of his advice is a little obscure, no doubt because of its specific reference to details of the Corinthian situation. But the general principle is clear: women and men relate to each other not in a context of male (or female) domination, but in a life of mutual love and service: 'A man should fulfil his duty… a woman should fulfil her duty.… A wife is not the master of her own body… a husband is not the master of his own body…' (1 Corinthians 7:3–4). This is the natural outcome of Paul's insistence that God's new way of bringing peace to the world is rooted in justice and facilitated by love and generosity. So what about 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 where Paul seems to undermine all that by saying that 'the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak' (RSV)? Some have resolved this conundrum by suggesting that these verses are not a part of Paul's original letter, but were added later by someone who wished to find Pauline authority for silencing troublesome women. There is a little evidence for this in the ancient

manuscripts of the New Testament, but probably not enough to justify such a conclusion. There are however a number of other clues in Paul's letters that clarify what he says here:

If we can see a difference between 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (where women are encouraged to participate in public ministry) and 14:33b–35 (where they are not), then we can be sure that Paul would not have missed it. Presumably he did not think this was a contradiction, though he may well have thought that in one passage he was stating a general principle while in another he was giving specific advice to deal with a very particular situation. Or, as some have proposed, he may have been quoting an opinion held by some in Corinth, which he then goes on to dismiss. The whole of the Corinthian correspondence is shot through with this sort of tension, and the volatile nature of the church seems almost to have demanded it. In this particular case, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, with its appeal to creation, has every appearance of being the general principle.

It is easy to miss the fact that women are not the only ones told to be quiet in 1 Corinthians 14. The whole chapter gives instructions to various people in the church (some of them certainly men) telling them when it is appropriate to speak and when they should be silent. Worship in Corinth was being hijacked by people competing with each other to gain the attention of the rest. It requires no great leap of the imagination to suppose that a group of women may have been among them. It is instructive that as an alternative to speaking in church, Paul here tells them to 'ask their husbands at home', which rather suggests that the speaking in question consisted of loud private conversations that ought to be conducted somewhere other than in worship.

In dealing with the church at Corinth, we have suggested that there was something like what later came to be known as Gnosticism lurking in the background. If so, this could also offer a clue to the background and meaning of this passage. The only other New Testament book containing instructions like 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 was probably written against a similar background of

church life (1 Timothy 2:8–15). In the Gnostic heresies of the second century women often played a conspicuous part that amounted to a kind of female chauvinism, and some groups in Corinth may even at this early period have had theological reasons for wanting to assert the priority of female spirituality over against male ways of doing things, perhaps (as seems to have been the case in 1 Timothy) arguing that an ascetic lifestyle that did not include motherhood offered spiritual advantage. If so, it is consistent with Paul's teaching that he should have wanted to curtail their activities. To him, exploitation of men was just as abhorrent as prejudice against women, and both would be a denial of the true meaning of divine justice.

Slavery

Was Paul committed to the abolition of slavery too? There is less material available for us to give a precise answer to that question, for nowhere does Paul actually mention the status of slavery as an institution. Of course, Galatians 3:28 implies the end of slavery, just as it envisaged the end of racism and sexism. But there are only one or two hints in Paul's letters showing how he would deal with this particular matter:

In Colossians 3:22–4:1 and Ephesians 6:5–9 Paul advises readers on various household circumstances, one of which is the master/slave relationship. Here he takes it for granted that slavery will continue to exist, though his advice contains certain distinctive elements when he reminds masters that they have a personal responsibility for the welfare of their slaves, and for that reason they should treat them generously. The same emphasis on mutuality is found here as in his teaching elsewhere on marriage – and in the culture of the time, the idea that masters had obligations of any sort to slaves would undoubtedly have been a progressive position.

Philemon is a personal letter sent by Paul with a runaway slave whom he was returning to his master. Here again, his precise intention is ambivalent, as we saw in discussing that letter. On the one hand, he seems to be asking Philemon to release the slave Onesimus – yet, paradoxically perhaps, he sends him back at the same time!

The Onesimus episode seems to suggest that though Paul wanted the slave released he was not prepared to go beyond the law to achieve it, and this perhaps offers a clue to his thinking on the matter. We cannot reasonably think that Paul would not have realized that the gospel demanded an end to slavery, but his attitude to it was probably influenced by two further considerations:

Slavery was the keystone of the entire economic structure of the empire. To abolish slavery would have required a radical dismantling of the very fabric of society. But neither Paul nor any other Christians were in a strong position politically (1 Corinthians 1:26) and the crushing of slave revolts in the first century BC had shown that such attempts were doomed to failure. Paul had to make a difficult choice: either challenge the vested interests of the Roman state, and quite probably perish in the process, or accept the situation and seek to exert whatever influence could be achieved through the establishment of a subversive counter-culture in the Christian communities. Paul made the second choice, and we have no reason to suppose that he did not invite slaves and masters to demonstrate their new-found sense of justice within the Christian community, even though he was forced to recognize his inability to change things in the wider world.

Paul's personal experience of Roman slaves probably informed this decision. Modern readers tend to think of slavery in terms of the American experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There were of course many who were degraded and dehumanized in that way, especially those who were either viewed as criminals or belonged to races that had been conquered by the imperial armies. But the majority of slaves in Roman society were 'household slaves' living in the homes of their masters in a more or less harmonious extended family. They were the equivalent of today's ordinary workers, except that their employers gave them the security of housing as well as employment. This was the version of slavery Paul knew most about (Onesimus was one such) and he could no doubt see that unless it was accompanied by a radical restructuring of the entire Roman economic system, the emancipation of such household slaves would lead not to greater freedom, but less, with enforced homelessness and destitution being the inevitable outcome for large numbers of them.

Paul's attitude on all these issues was no doubt less progressive than modern Christians might wish, and changing circumstances and perceptions of human nature and potential are constantly raising questions that were unheard of in

Paul's day. Like other aspects of his advice, Paul's recommendations to the churches on these matters were directly related to the situations in which they found themselves, and cannot therefore be applied across the board to all times and places. Paul would have been among the first to recognize that, which is why he needs to be appreciated within his own context. In that frame of reference, his teaching was radical. But it was a pragmatic radicalism, for Paul realized that there was likely to be a limit to the extent of social reform that one person with no political influence could bring about single-handed. His gospel demanded extensive change to the accepted conventions of human relationships, and where Paul could achieve this (in his own Christian communities) he sought to do so. But it was left to later generations of Christians, in different cultural circumstances, to realize the full significance of his gospel of justice and grace, and to act in accordance with it.

Women’s lives in the Roman empire

It would be anachronistic to compare the opportunities open to Roman women with those enjoyed in Western culture today, but they certainly had more freedom than either their Greek or Jewish counterparts. There is evidence of women holding positions in local government, and working in medicine and manufacturing as well as taking part in the athletic games and other educational and artistic pursuits. Some, by virtue of being born into families of high status, were able to exercise influence that went well beyond the male-dominated cultural expectations of the time. All this is reflected in the New Testament, with Lydia, apparently the first convert in Philippi, exemplifying the first-century businesswoman (Acts 16:11–15). Much of the debate over precisely how much (or how little) active participation by women was encouraged in the life of the early church focuses on the different expectations within different ethnic communities. In traditional Greek culture, women had been largely confined to their own spaces within the household – places in which, however, they ruled supreme. Macedonian women, however, had always enjoyed greater freedoms, something that by the first century had gradually spread to most of Greece and Asia Minor. Jewish women might not have been closely confined to their own quarters, but their households operated in much the same way as traditional Greek ones, with domestic duties being their main concern along with maintaining an attractive appearance for their husbands and being readily available for sex. Religiously, there was a certain tension in this because many of the most important festivals (sabbath and Passover, for example) were home-based and so came under the control of women, but at the same time they were regarded as incapable of fulfilling all the requirements of the Torah, mostly for reasons of ritual impurity connected with their natural bodily functions in pregnancy and childbirth.

This is the picture of women’s lives that is reflected in New Testament passages such as the Pastoral Epistles where women are exhorted to keep their families in order and avoid shaming their husbands (1 Timothy 5:14, Titus 2:3–5), and also in the various sets of instructions on how different individuals should relate

within the family (Colossians 3:18–4:1, 1 Peter 3:1–7). It is also the background against which the conflicts reflected in Corinth need to be understood. In this cosmopolitan city, it would have been taken for granted that women should be free to play a significant part in the life of the church, just as they did in many other religious contexts of the day. In a community that also included culturally conservative Jewish converts to Christianity, however, that was bound to create conflict, for not only were women banned from speaking in the synagogues, they were not even allowed to occupy the same space as the men. Given all this, Paul's much debated instructions to the women of Corinth can be seen as an attempt at forging a compromise that would keep them all happy, for he affirmed the right of women to play a public part in worship while proposing that in order to pacify the more conservative members they should only do so with covered heads (1 Corinthians 11:2–16). Actually, in Roman religious shrines, men as well as women would cover their heads when offering sacrifices. This was not with the sort of veil found in Islamic culture, but more like the corner of a dress or toga pulled over the head, and its purpose was to restrict one's peripheral vision so that undivided attention could be paid to the religious task in hand. Jewish men had not at this time adopted the custom of covering their heads while praying or reading the scriptures, so Paul's advice on this reflects an attempt to bring together Jewish and Roman customs. The theme of freedom for women continued later when he found himself advising a couple of women who were causing trouble in Philippi: he never even thought of suggesting that they should withdraw from church leadership, but gave exactly the same sort of advice as he would have given to men, urging them to settle their differences because he actually valued them as co-workers (Philippians 4:2–3). While it would be unreasonable to judge Paul, or any other first-century person, by reference to the expectations of the twenty-first century, he certainly turns out to be much more supportive of women in ministry than his detractors often suppose, and in Romans 16 explicitly affirms his appreciation of the work being done by Phoebe and Prisca, Tryphaena, and Tryphosa, and several other unnamed women, as well as Junia to whom he applies the title of 'apostle'.

PART 5

REFINING THE FAITH

CHAPTER 18

ETHICS AND RITUAL: JAMES AND HEBREWS

It is impossible to understand the story of the early church without appreciating that the early Christian movement was deeply rooted in the Jewish faith. Jesus was a Jew, as were all his original disciples, and so were most if not all the converts on the Day of Pentecost. But even in the earliest days, people like Stephen were asking whether Christianity was just another sect within Judaism, or whether it needed to become something distinctive and new. These questions became more pressing once Paul and others had moved out into the wider world to take the message about Jesus to Gentile people with no previous Jewish connections. Paul clearly regarded himself as an ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ (Romans 11:13), and his practice of going first to the Jewish synagogues is to be understood in that context, as that is where he would find the sort of Gentiles who would most readily warm to his message (Acts 13:14, 14:1, 17:1–2). As a result of that, many of the issues dealt with in Paul’s letters relate to questions about the Old Testament Law and the nature of Christian belief and behaviour over against Jewish traditions.

Christians always regarded themselves as part of the Jewish story, and not only respected the Hebrew Bible but regarded it as part and parcel of their own scriptural tradition, what eventually became the Old (or First) Testament alongside the writings of apostles and others (the New, or Second Testament). It was natural then to wonder about the relationship of their own experience of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to the inherited faith of Israel. Paul’s letters deal repeatedly with this question but other Christians were tackling these issues in slightly different ways, some of which are reflected in what are often called the ‘general epistles’. These are mostly shorter than Paul’s letters, and they are also considerably less complex. But they are no less valuable for that, as they provide direct access to areas of the church’s life and thinking that are mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament.

James on Christian morality

In the Roman world Jewish people were often distinguished not so much by what they thought as by what they did. They circumcised their male children, kept the sabbath day apart and observed distinctive laws about the preparation and consumption of food. But these were not the only things that announced to the Romans that the Jews were different: they also had a wide-ranging code of moral behaviour. Many practices that were taken for granted in the empire were avoided by Jews – not just because they were un-Jewish but because they seemed to be against the Law of God. Chapter 14 suggested that this was the point of the prohibitions articulated at the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–29). In the face of the self-indulgence of much Greek and Roman culture many Gentiles found the Jewish way attractive and either became full proselytes or (like Cornelius, Acts 10:1–2) adopted the beliefs and lifestyle of Judaism without all the other requirements of the Torah. Though much of it concerns matters of religious ritual the Torah has a strong moral core, in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) and elsewhere (especially the book of Deuteronomy). The two naturally belonged together because it was taken for granted that faith would affect everyday life. The sacred and the secular could not be separated one from the other, for all of life was lived in the presence of God – something the Hebrew prophets repeatedly emphasized. If the life of the temple made no difference to behaviour in the home or market place, something fundamental was lost. Jesus said the same, and the letter of James continues this theme: religious belief is worthless if it does not affect the way people live. Devotion to God does not end at the door of the church. It only begins there: ‘What God… considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world’ (1:27). The heart of real devotion to God is to love one’s neighbour as oneself (2:1–13) and without deeds that match that aspiration, abstract faith is worthless (2:14–26).

Like Jesus, James uses many illustrations to deliver his message. In one passage he draws a vivid verbal picture of the apparent splendour of a rich person. Like the flowers whose beauty they try to copy, such people will last for only a short

time (1:10–11, 5:1–6; cf. Matthew 6:28–30). James also turns his attention to the dangers of thoughtless talk. Just as a small rudder can steer a ship many times larger than itself, so the tongue has an influence that is out of all proportion to its size – and if we are not careful it can make trouble for ourselves and for other people. Once a person loses control of their tongue, it can create conditions like a forest fire, which is started by just one small spark but is very difficult to extinguish (3:1–12). James takes many illustrations from the familiar world of Palestinian agriculture. He condemns the employer who refuses to pay workers a proper wage for a day's work (5:1–6). Jesus used a similar story to make a rather different point. He told of an employer who hired workers for the vineyard. They started work at different times of the day, so that when the time came for them to receive their wages some of them had only worked for an hour, while others had worked the whole day – but they all received the same pay (Matthew 20:1–16). Jesus' hearers must have rubbed their eyes with amazement when they heard that, for in their experience employers were more likely to treat them the way James describes. Of course, Jesus was speaking of a different kind of 'employer' – God – who can always be trusted to deal with people in a way that is overwhelmingly generous. The book of James has no carefully worked out argument as such, any more than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has a consistently argued theme (Matthew 5–7). But its message would not be lost on its readers. These people were suffering the sort of discrimination that James mentions, and they are urged to be patient and to trust in God for deliverance. What God has promised will come true, and God's people will be vindicated in the end (5:7–20).

A Christian book?

There are several unresolved questions about the letter of James. But two things are quite clear: it is an intensely Jewish writing, and it is concerned above everything else with correct behaviour. Some have thought it so Jewish that they have doubted whether it could really be Christian. Martin Luther dismissed it as ‘an epistle of straw, for it has no evangelical manner about it’ – an opinion that reveals more about Luther than it does about James. Others have pointed out that James mentions the name of Jesus in only two places (1:1, 2:1) and that when he gives examples for his readers to follow he prefers Old Testament figures like Abraham (2:21–24), Job (5:11), Elijah (5:17), and even the prostitute Rahab (2:25), rather than Jesus. Moreover, no significant facts about Jesus are mentioned anywhere in the book, not even his death and resurrection. Indeed, if we were to look for other similar books we would most easily find them in writings such as Proverbs in the Old Testament and other Wisdom books that were popular with Jewish readers in the time of Jesus. On the basis of such considerations it is often proposed that James was not written by a Christian at all, and that the two references to Jesus were inserted at some later date when Christians became embarrassed by the existence of this apparently Jewish book in their scriptures. But there is no evidence to support this idea. Not only does it ignore the Jewish origins of Christianity, but a later Gentile Christian editor who set out to change what was supposed to be a Jewish book into a Christian one would surely have inserted far more references than just two mentions of the name of Jesus.

James and Jesus

Far from suggesting that there is something deficient about the book of James, its similarities to Jewish ways of thinking ought to challenge the perception of those contemporary readers who have seen a sharp dichotomy between the early church and its Jewish origins. For the message of James is actually very much in harmony with the teaching of Jesus. This is more than just a superficial similarity, for there are many detailed points at which James's advice corresponds closely to specific aspects of Jesus' teaching as we know it from the synoptic gospels.

Similarities between the teaching of James and Jesus

God is the source and giver of all good gifts

Christians must pay attention to God's word but also be prepared to put it into pra

Christians should share God's mercy with others

Christians should endeavour to make peace in the world

'Love your neighbour as you love yourself'

If this teaching is followed, the true nature of the Christian will be impossible to l

Followers of Jesus can pray to God, confident their prayers will be answered

God is the only judge, and the one to whom Christians are responsible

Christians should make promises that others can accept and trust, because they in

The words of James and the words of Jesus are not identical in any of these passages, but the language used and the sentiments expressed are so similar that it seems obvious there must be some connection. It is possible that the writer of James knew these sayings in a slightly different form than they now have in the gospels: stories and sayings of Jesus circulated orally for some time before they were written down, and the fact that some of this teaching has a more primitive form in James than it does in Matthew could imply that James had access to it at an earlier stage than the writers of the gospels. It is perhaps more likely that James was so familiar with Jesus' teachings that he just incorporated it into his own thinking almost unconsciously, in much the same way as the wisdom teacher Jesus ben Sira incorporated the teaching of Proverbs into his own book The Wisdom of Ben Sira, or Ecclesiasticus (c.180 BC).

The Letter of James

Who wrote the letter of James, and who were its first readers? Most New Testament books offer clues that enable us to answer such questions. But in the case of James there is virtually nothing at all that provides specific indications about either the author or the recipients of this letter. Indeed, it is not even certain that it really was an actual letter that was sent from one person to a group of others.

Author

Apart from the mention of a person called James in the opening sentence there is no further reference to the writer, readers, or any other event or person. James itself was a very common name (in Greek it is actually Iakōbos, literally ‘Jacob’, first rendered as ‘James’ by the translators of the King James Version of the English Bible, to honour the king who commissioned it, James I of England). He is described as ‘a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ which could apply to any Christian. The descriptions of people and their behaviour could also apply to many different situations, not only in the ancient world but in most cultures, for it deals with traits of human nature that are the same the world over. It is as pointless to look for the identity of the rich people of whom James complains (James 2:1–4) as it would be to try and find out who the Good Samaritan was (Luke 10:25–37).

Early church traditions give no more real help. There is no trace of this letter in other Christian literature until the end of the second century and Eusebius listed it as one of the New Testament books whose value was disputed (Ecclesiastical History 3.25.3). But he also added that the same disputed books ‘have been produced publicly with the rest in most churches’ and then linked this one with James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastical History 2.23.25). Though this statement in Eusebius is obviously from a much later date than any possible time when the epistle of James might have been written, many scholars are prepared to believe it and accept the book as the work of James of Jerusalem. If we are looking for individuals by the name of James who are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, then there are only two possible candidates: James the disciple and brother of John, and James the brother of Jesus. Faced with a choice between these two, most scholars would choose the second, on the basis that James the apostle was martyred in AD 44 (Acts 12:1–3), and it is assumed that this date would be too early for the writing of any of the New Testament books. In addition, that particular James does not figure prominently in the stories in Acts whereas James the brother of Jesus became well-known: he is a central figure in Acts, and is also mentioned in Paul’s writings. He would certainly seem to be the kind of person who could

write to other Christians with no more introduction than his name.

But a number of arguments have been put forward against this idea that James of Jerusalem wrote the letter of James:

It is written in very good Greek, in an elegant style that seems to imply some acquaintance with Greek literary arts. But would this be likely if it was the work of someone from rural Galilee? This argument was given considerable weight by scholars of previous generations who drew a sharp distinction between the culture of Palestine (which they believed was largely insulated from Greek influence) and the culture of the wider Hellenistic world. This is now known to be an over-simplification of a complex set of cultural interactions between the various regions of the Roman empire and in an area such as Galilee it would have been possible for a person like James to achieve an extensive knowledge of Greek language and culture. Moreover, at a number of places in the book the distinctive idiom and style of the Semitic languages Hebrew and Aramaic seem to have influenced its style of writing (2:7, 3:12, 4:13–15, 5:17), which in turn suggests that the writer also knew one or both of these languages.

If this book had been written by James the brother of Jesus, would he not have made more specific mentions of his famous brother? Indeed, since James was not a disciple during Jesus' own lifetime, would it not have been natural for him to have included some account of his conversion (alluded to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:7)? As it is, the writer seems to go out of his way to avoid mentioning Jesus directly: surely, therefore, he cannot have been this particular James? There is some weight in this argument, but it is an argument from silence, which really depends on guesswork. If we are unsure of the identity of an ancient author, then making judgments about what he or she may or may not have been expected to write is, at best, a very subjective business.

In James 2:14–26 there is a passage that contrasts faith and actions as the basis

of true commitment. Paul uses similar language, especially in Galatians and Romans, and the statements in James have often been regarded as a deliberate reply to and correction of Paul's opinions. If that is the case, then James must have been written after Paul's time, probably after his views had become a source of controversy – and on any account, this must have been long after any possible date for the death of James of Jerusalem. But there is no reason to suppose either that James knew Paul's writings, or, as some have suggested, that Paul knew the letter of James.

The strongest reason of all for questioning whether James of Jerusalem could have written this book is its conviction that true belief should be described in purely ethical terms. James had faced this question over the admission of Gentile converts to the church: were they to obey the whole of the Torah or not? While James did not go along with those extremists who insisted that Gentile Christians should become Jews by being circumcised, Acts 15:13–21 is widely interpreted as showing him insisting that they should observe not only Jewish morality but also some ritual and food laws as well. Is it therefore likely that he would have written that the 'law of the Kingdom' could be kept by loving one's neighbour (2:8)? But if the Apostolic Decree constituted a much broader ethical platform, as was argued in chapter 14, then not only is that argument considerably weakened but it also confirms the similarities between James's teaching and that of Jesus.

Date

Whether or not this book has a connection with James of Jerusalem, there are strong reasons for placing it in an early period of the church's life rather than a later one.

The opening sentence addresses 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' (1:1). Taken literally, that could mean the whole of the Jewish people scattered throughout the world. The only period in the church's history when anyone could write to the whole of God's people in this way (as contrasted with 1 Peter, which was addressed only to certain areas) was at the very beginning of its history, when the church was still visibly Jewish and centred on Jerusalem. This implies a time after the death of Stephen, but before Paul's travels.

This is further supported by the fact that there is no sign anywhere in James of a break between Judaism and Christianity. The well-to-do oppressors of the poor (2:6–7) were almost certainly Jewish people, but they are condemned for their selfishness, not their religion or ethnicity as they might have been at a later period. Moreover, the gathering so vividly described in James 2:1–4 is said to be in 'the synagogue' (2:2). This situation is very similar to that described in Acts 4–5, when Jewish aristocrats were oppressing a lower-class proletarian Christian movement.

The background to much of the imagery in James is clearly Palestinian. The mention of 'autumn and spring rains' (5:7) would have been meaningless in other parts of the Roman empire, while the agricultural practices mentioned in the preceding verses are of a type that disappeared for good in Palestine after AD 70 but which were widespread in the days of Jesus.

There is no evidence anywhere in James of the later practices or problems of the church. Not only is the Jewish/Gentile controversy unknown, but there is no mention of heresy and no reference to the organization of the church or to doctrinal arguments of any sort. In addition, the moral teaching of James makes no mention of later ethical concerns over the adoption of unacceptable Hellenistic standards in the church. Instead, it is almost exclusively directed to the problems that we know occurred in a Jewish environment.

Origin

It will never be possible to prove or disprove the authorship of James of Jerusalem as there is no hard evidence either way. But there are strong reasons for placing it in a very early period of the church's life. The teaching of James is so similar to that of Jesus himself, and uses so much of the same rural imagery, that it is not unreasonable to suppose it has a similar background. It is not inconceivable that it had its origins among those followers of Jesus who remained in Galilee after the main centre of the church moved to Jerusalem. It is impossible to prove this, of course, for we know next to nothing about such Galilean believers. But the message of James would certainly be especially appropriate to those who were worshipping in the synagogues of rural Palestine and at the same time were trying to put into practice what Jesus had taught them. Such people might easily have been tempted to substitute religious formality for the spiritual realities of which Jesus had spoken and, as a relative minority, they would also be open to the kind of opposition that James mentions. If the book originated in such a context, this may also explain why its value was unrecognized in the wider church for so long. Its eventual association with an important person like James of Jerusalem would then have been a means of justifying its inclusion in the canon of the New Testament. It could also reflect the possibility that the church in Jerusalem was included in 'God's people in the Dispersion', to whom James was originally dispatched at an early stage in the history of the church.

‘Faith’ and ‘works’ in Paul and James

When Martin Luther called James ‘an epistle of straw’ his main reason for doing so was that he believed James’s theology was fundamentally different from Paul’s – and, since Paul was his hero, he was forced to relegate James to a secondary position. A comparison of James 2:24 with Romans 3:28 will readily demonstrate what led him to this conclusion:

James 2:24: You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (NRSV).

Romans 3:28: For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works [of] the law (NRSV).

These two statements have every appearance of being mutually contradictory. Not only do they seem to be saying opposite things to each other: they also use exactly the same Greek words to do so! But when we examine them more carefully, and especially when we place them in their proper contexts, this alleged contradiction becomes much less obvious:

Though they both speak of ‘faith’, James and Paul seem to mean rather different things by this word. For Paul, ‘faith’ is about belief in Jesus as Messiah and commitment to the message of peace through justice and generosity of which Jesus spoke. In James, however, ‘faith’ has a broader meaning, almost being something like ‘faith’ as belief in God, as opposed to atheism. For James, the term ‘faith’ is more akin to the intellectual acceptance of theological propositions, whereas Paul’s concern was more focused on faith as personal

commitment.

A similar distinction may be drawn in the way they each use the term ‘works’. When James mentions ‘works’ he refers to the sort of behaviour that naturally stems from commitment to Christ (1:25; 2:8). But the ‘works’ that Paul writes about are attitudes of self-sufficiency, the sort of behaviour that might be described as ‘going through the motions’ – doing apparently good things without any commitment to the radical demands of the gospel. In Galatians and Romans, Paul was contending against the self-righteousness of people who thought that by external religious observance they could commend themselves to God. So he condemns such things – and in doing so he echoed the teaching of Jesus (Luke 18:9–14). James, on the other hand, was fighting against the temptation to suppose that right belief of an abstract, propositional sort is all that matters, and he accordingly emphasizes that doctrines with no practical effect are worthless. Again, he also echoes the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 7:21–23).

This entire debate depends on the mistaken understanding of Judaism as a religion of legalism, propounded by Luther and perpetuated by generations of Protestant scholars until relatively recent times. But once Judaism is seen in its own terms as a faith combining both personal commitment and loving actions, the alleged dichotomy between Paul and James can be seen for what it is: the imposition of an alien modern, Western agenda on an ancient text. The reality is that Paul and James were both insisting that faith and works belong together, and the one without the other is worthless.

Hebrews and Jewish ritual

For generations, the temple in Jerusalem occupied a special place in the life and thinking of Jewish people. The construction of the first temple was associated with the reign of Solomon (970–930 BC), who was highly esteemed as the one king (along with his father David) who had really put ancient Israel on the political map of the day (1 Kings 8:20–21). Though this empire fragmented almost overnight on Solomon's death, the temple stood as a monument to his achievements and survived as the main legacy of the royal dynasty of David. It could on occasion be invested with an almost mystical significance, and even in the dark days just before its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, the people of Jerusalem managed to convince themselves that, against all the odds, the physical presence of the temple in their city would somehow save them from invasion. They were wrong, of course, as the prophet Jeremiah was quick to remind them, pointing out that they were pinning their hope on a purely outward form of religious activity instead of taking seriously the moral and spiritual demands placed upon them by their relationship with God (Jeremiah 21:1–23:32).

The centrality of the temple

Nebuchadnezzar plundered Solomon's temple in 586 BC, but it was repaired and brought back into regular use under the influence of Ezra and Nehemiah, whose period is documented in the Old Testament books named after them. By the New Testament period it was in the process of being replaced with a structure even more splendid than the original had been. In 20 BC, Herod the Great decided to build a new temple that would be as grand as any monument in the Roman world. He did not live to see it finished: the work was so ambitious and costly that it went on for something like eighty years. By the time this new temple was completed the Jews were in revolt against the Romans, and soon afterwards it was destroyed by the Roman general Titus in AD 70, and was never rebuilt. This was the temple that Jesus and the first Christians knew, and it was a centre of devotion for Jewish believers from all over the Roman empire. By now synagogues had been established in every city where there was a Jewish population of any size. But worship in the synagogue was not the same as worship in the temple. The synagogue had originated as a social convenience for Jews living in lands far removed from Palestine, but the temple in Jerusalem was the place where Israel's faith found its true focus. While synagogue worship embraced traditions such as circumcision and the food laws, most of the rites prescribed in the Torah could only be carried out in their entirety in the temple at Jerusalem. Here, the priests still offered sacrifices as their predecessors had done for generations, and all the great religious festivals had special significance when celebrated at the temple. Pilgrims travelled from all over the empire to worship in its holy places and it was an ambition for every faithful Jew to visit the temple at least once in a lifetime. The crowds who gathered to hear Peter on the Day of Pentecost were not unusually large, and at festival times the population of Jerusalem regularly increased tenfold, or even more.

How did all this relate to Christian faith? For Gentile believers, with no previous connection with the Jewish faith, this question seemed trivial: the Jerusalem temple had never featured in their spirituality before, so why should it do so now? But this was a matter of more fundamental importance for those with a Jewish heritage. Moreover, it highlighted a real problem for the early Gentile

mission. It was relatively straightforward for the early Christians to adopt the moral standards of the Torah, but what about the many detailed ritual practices that it also required? Why adopt the morality as normative and not those passages that were more specifically related to formal worship? Putting the question that way merely serves to highlight its complexity, for ultimately the role of the temple in Jerusalem could not be dealt with independently from matters like circumcision that proved so contentious in the churches associated with Paul. In the event, as the church became more and more Gentile that question was ultimately answered in favour of those who, like Paul, believed that the Law was not directly relevant to the Christian life of Gentile believers. But in the first century there were many Jewish Christians who not only continued with practices like circumcision but also felt a special affection for their traditional priesthood and ritual. The first followers of Jesus in Jerusalem participated freely in the services at the temple. It never occurred to them not to do so, and in any case that was where they would find others willing to listen to their new message about Jesus as Messiah (Acts 2:46–47; 3:1–10). Nor was their right to continue to worship in the temple challenged by non-messianic Jews. The first generation of messianic believers had all been born Jews, and there was never any suggestion that they should deny their Jewishness in order to follow Jesus. But a different voice was heard when Stephen and other like-minded Hellenistic messianic Jews suggested that the day of the temple and its rituals was finished. The death of Jesus could be described using the language of sacrifice familiar from the Hebrew Bible, which made it easy to conclude that Jesus' death on the cross had in some way superseded the repeated sacrifices of the Jerusalem temple. What then was the relationship between traditional ritual practices and belief in Jesus as Messiah? Was Stephen right, and even the temple was now redundant? If he was, how could that be reconciled with esteeming the Hebrew scriptures as the word of God?

This is the sort of question that inspired the book of Hebrews. The encouragement and advice it offers its readers seems to imply that they were being harassed, if not officially persecuted – perhaps because of their questioning of these traditional Jewish practices. This may explain why the question of Jewish worship had become so important to them: if they were prepared to conform to the traditional pattern, life could be a lot easier. The stories of Acts show how religious fanatics could make life really difficult for Christian believers (Acts 13:50; 14:5, 19), and some scholars believe a similar

situation is envisaged here. On the other hand, Christians throughout the Roman empire must always have been tempted to try and link themselves to Judaism, especially in times of persecution – for Judaism was a permitted religion under Roman law whereas at this stage Christianity was not.

The message of the book

The writer of Hebrews argued that it was both pointless and unnecessary for Christians to keep the ritual requirements of the Law. For this author, Jesus was God's final word (1:1–3). Previous prophets in ancient Israel had spoken in God's name to the people of their own time, but they were now all summed-up and replaced by Jesus. Jesus is compared not only with the angels whom Jewish tradition identified with the giving of the Torah (1:4–2:18), but also with Aaron, the archetype of every Jewish priest, and other Jewish heroes like Moses and Joshua (3:1–4:13). But none of them could measure up to Jesus. They were mere mortals but Jesus was 'Son of God' and therefore greater than them all. Yet because of his human experience, he understood how people felt when faced with the power of evil (2:17–18; 4:14–15). He was the fulfilment of all Judaism's aspirations, 'a great high priest' who both summed up and superseded all that had gone before (4:14–5:10).

Continuing to write of Jesus under the imagery of the Jewish priesthood, Hebrews proposes that a more suitable Old Testament image to illustrate what Jesus had done may be found in the figure of Melchizedek (5:11–7:28). In the original stories of the Hebrew Bible, this Melchizedek is a shadowy figure who only appears very occasionally and about whom next to nothing is known. He appears briefly in a story about Abraham (Genesis 14:17–20), where very little is said about him, and in one of the psalms the king in Jerusalem is called 'a priest for ever in the line of succession to Melchizedek' (Psalm 110:4, author's translation). Hebrews uses the obscurity of these references to argue that since 'there is no record of Melchizedek's father or mother or of any of his ancestors; no record of his birth or of his death', he must be 'like the Son of God', who is similarly timeless (7:3). Attention is drawn to the fact that Abraham had recognized the greatness of this priestly figure (treating him with reverence, and giving him gifts) long before Aaron (the ancestor of all priests) was born. If Abraham had paid homage to Melchizedek, then that in itself was enough to demonstrate the superiority of his position over the later priestly line descended from Aaron. Since Abraham became the ancestor of all future generations, then by inference Aaron had also acknowledged Melchizedek, even though at the

time ‘he was still in the loins of his ancestor’ (7:10, NRSV). If more proof of Jesus’ superiority to the old priestly order was needed, then the writer of Hebrews pointed out that the regular priests died and were succeeded by others, while Jesus, like Melchizedek apparently, lived for ever.

Most readers today will struggle to comprehend all this because the form of the argument depends on a way of reasoning that is simply alien to most of us. The idea that all future generations are somehow contained within the reproductive organs of their primeval parents might easily be dismissed as nonsensical. But this sort of logic would make perfect sense in the context of the prevailing physiology of the first-century world. The more important thing to notice is the conclusion reached by the author on the basis of this discussion, which is remarkably simple considering the convoluted route taken to arrive at it: ‘we have such a High Priest, who sits at the right side of the throne of the Divine Majesty in heaven. This one serves as High Priest in the Most Holy Place, that is, in the real tent which was put up by the Lord, not by humans’ (8:1–2, author’s translation). Everything that had been achieved through the traditional rituals – first in the ‘tent’ (or tabernacle), then in the temple – was only a temporary alleviation of the human condition, and those things to which the temple had looked forward had now been achieved permanently by Jesus. The sacrifices offered by the priesthood had to be repeated, because they could only account for past wrongdoing whereas the sacrifice of Jesus (himself, on the cross) had more far-reaching consequences and had the power to release humanity from ‘useless rituals, so that we may serve the living God’ (9:14). Now, ‘God does away with all the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place’ (10:9). Because of that, those who are tempted to turn back and perpetuate the old rituals of Judaism are actually denying the effectiveness of what God has done in Jesus. They are ‘despising the Son of God’ and insulting the Holy Spirit (10:29). They have effectively collaborated with those who reject Jesus, and God has no time for such people. To turn back to the old ways is to be lost, but those who trust in God and accept what Jesus has accomplished will find true and lasting salvation (10:39).

This is all strong stuff, capable of being interpreted as a sternly anti-Semitic polemic. But the author of Hebrews insists that it was nothing new – in fact it

was the natural outworking of the Jewish faith. Far from being redundant, Judaism was an essential prerequisite for the full articulation of Christian faith – and so Hebrews goes on to list a ‘large crowd of witnesses’ throughout Jewish history whose experience of God is part of the ongoing narrative that culminated with the coming of Jesus (11:1–38). These people will receive the same reward as faithful Christians (11:39–40), and their story should be a lasting encouragement to Christians to get their priorities right and to keep their eyes firmly fixed on Jesus alone as their example and inspiration (12:1–11). To do this, they must live at peace with others and show love for other Christians, as well as members of their own families (12:14; 13:1–21). By doing so, they will please God, who in turn will ‘provide you with every good thing you need in order to do [God’s] will’ (13:21).

Reimagining the Old Testament

The most distinctive feature of Hebrews is the way it uses the Hebrew scriptures to back up its arguments. By focusing on characters such as Aaron or Melchizedek and rituals like the Day of Atonement, the author suggests that these things were some sort of symbolic preview of the work of Jesus. Just as Aaron was a high priest, so was Jesus – though with significantly greater effect. His position was more directly comparable to that of Melchizedek, and the sacrifice that Jesus offered had more lasting benefits than the traditional ritual of the Day of Atonement. This is not the way most readers today would approach the Old Testament. We may ask questions about its morality or its picture of God, but we would not expect to find detailed descriptions of the person of Jesus (who was born at least two centuries after its latest events) hidden within its pages. Yet the underlying question that puzzled the author of Hebrews is still a relevant one: namely, in what sense is the Old Testament a 'Christian' book? Obviously, it was not written by Christians, but the author of Hebrews shared the conviction of the early church (and of later Christians) that the God of whom the ancient scriptures speak is the same God as Jesus revealed. Since God is unchangeable, it is therefore legitimate to look for some sort of unity between the two Christian Testaments.

The author of Hebrews found this unity by supposing that, since the same God is involved in both parts of the Christian Bible, God's activities in the earlier stages of its story can be taken as a pattern or visual aid for what God does in the later stages. He is not suggesting that ancient Israel ever perceived their history and priestly rituals as a psychic glimpse into the unknown future. Rather, Hebrews argues, when Christians looked back with the benefit of hindsight they could see how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus might appropriately be described as the 'fulfilment' of all that had gone before. Peter, for example, described Jesus as 'the Servant of God' (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:25–30), no doubt referring to those passages in the book of Isaiah that have come to be known as the Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12). For Isaiah and his contemporaries, the Servant was a real person or persons: the whole nation of Israel, or perhaps the prophet himself. But as Peter looked back he found that these passages

provided the imagery with which he could most authentically sum up Jesus' ministry. Hebrews is doing the same thing with other people (Moses, Joshua, Aaron, Melchizedek), events (the Day of Atonement), and artefacts (the tent of worship in the desert).

This way of interpreting the Hebrew Bible was not unknown in Judaism. Philo of Alexandria had elevated it to an art form, arguing that its apparently 'historical' narratives could be understood as symbols of the insights of Greek philosophy, at least as he understood them from his own Jewish background. Many of the Church Fathers later read not only the Old Testament but also the New in this way, ignoring the reality of its stories and regarding them instead as complex allegories of abstract ideas. Hilary of Poitiers (c. AD 315–368) described the reasoning behind this:

Every work contained in the sacred volume announces by word, explains by facts, and corroborates by examples the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.… From the beginning of the world Christ, by authentic and absolute prefigurations in the person of the Patriarchs, gives birth to the Church, washes it clean, sanctifies it, chooses it, places it apart and redeems it: by the sleep of Adam, by the deluge in the days of Noah, by the blessing of Melchizedek, by Abraham's justification, by the birth of Isaac, by the captivity of Jacob.… The purpose of this work, is to show that in each personage, in every age, and in every act, the image of his coming, of his teaching, of his resurrection, and of our church is reflected as in a mirror.

Introduction to The Treatise of Mysteries

For people with that mindset, it made little difference whether any of these people or events had ever actually existed because the important thing was the underlying truth that they were held to symbolize. Hebrews, however, pays some attention to historical reality, and does not treat the Old Testament as a story with no meaning apart from what later generations may choose to read into it. On the

contrary, it regards all that it reports as being the actions of God in real history, and when Hebrews compares Old and New Testaments, it places God on centre stage, emphasizing that God is the one who gives continuity and coherence to the grand sweep of history, for what God has revealed through Jesus is the next and final stage of the revelation begun through Moses.

This method of interpretation has often been described as ‘typology’. But to be useful this term needs to be applied quite precisely, to indicate a way of interpreting past events that treats them with integrity in their own context, while seeing within them a pattern running through history that reveals some greater underlying cause or purpose. Understood in this way, ‘typology’ can be set over against the kind of ‘allegory’ found in the work of Philo and the Church Fathers, as well as books like John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, in which their own message is the most important thing, and history is at best a subsidiary aid in the presentation of their own insights. The message of Hebrews draws attention to correspondences between Old and New Testaments, claiming to show how God’s work in one period of time was paralleled by and fulfilled in God’s work in Jesus. This method of expounding the Christian message is not found in any comprehensive form anywhere else in the New Testament. Its main appeal would obviously be to Christians with Jewish connections. It is far removed from the questions that today’s readers ask about the Old Testament though its core message is not irrelevant, for it is a reminder of the faithfulness and consistency of God’s dealings with people at all times and in all places (13:8).

Hebrews in context

Author

According to Eusebius, the third-century church leader Origen wrote of this book, ‘only God knows the truth as to who actually wrote this epistle’ (Ecclesiastical History 6.25.14). Some translations and ancient versions of the Bible entitle it ‘The epistle of Paul to the Hebrews’. But these words are not original and it is highly unlikely that this book has any connection at all with Paul:

Paul’s letters invariably followed the normal practice of Greek letter-writers and they leave us in no doubt as to the identity of their intended recipients and the reasons for sending them. But Hebrews is not addressed directly to anyone, and the only reason for supposing it to be a letter is the inclusion of what appears to be a personal greeting after the benediction with which the book closes (13:22–25). Some have suggested that this section was added later, to make Hebrews look more like one of Paul’s letters. It has even been suggested that Paul himself added the news of Timothy given in 13:23 to a book that Timothy had originally written. But there is nothing to support either of these conjectures.

The language and style of Hebrews is completely different from that of anything related to Paul. Hebrews has just about the best Greek style of any New Testament book and is clearly intended to be a piece of literature, unlike the informal colloquial style adopted by Paul and his colleagues. Even Origen noticed this: ‘The character of the diction of the epistle entitled “To the Hebrews” has not the apostle’s rudeness in speech… that is, in style. But that the epistle is better Greek in the framing of its diction, will be admitted by everyone who is able to discern differences of style’ (quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.25.11–12).

The concerns of Hebrews are also quite different from Paul’s interests. If, as

many believe, it was written primarily for the benefit of Jewish Christians, then Paul is unlikely to have written it in any case as his ministry was almost entirely among Gentiles. But even if it was written for Gentiles, its interest in the Torah is quite different from Paul's. His primary concern was with the moral demands of the Torah, and the ritual of tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices which is so important in Hebrews is never mentioned anywhere by Paul.

We can therefore be quite sure that Paul did not write Hebrews. But it is not easy to decide who did. There is so little specific reference to people and events that the most diverse characters have been suggested, all with more or less equal plausibility: Barnabas, Apollos, Timothy, Aquila, and Priscilla, and Luke have all been proposed as possible candidates. In reality, we are no nearer to a solution than Origen was. But it is possible to deduce some key facts about the otherwise unknown author from a close reading of the text of the book:

The author of Hebrews did not belong to the same group as the apostles. Explaining how the Christian message had reached him, the writer comments: 'The Lord himself first announced this salvation, and those who heard him proved to us that it is true' (2:3). Some scholars have drawn inferences from this about the possible date of the book. But this statement does not necessarily imply that the writer belonged to a different generation from the apostles, only that he was not among their number. A person like Stephen would fit this description just as easily as someone from a later period.

The author was clearly well-educated. He knew how to write good Greek and was also well-versed in the literary and rhetorical conventions of the Hellenistic age. Hebrews also reveals a person with some acquaintance with ideas that were common among Greek thinkers. The way the heavenly world, where Christ dwells, is contrasted with the material world in which traditional ritual worship operates, is not all that different from Plato's notion about the world of forms, or ideas, that gives meaning to the world we know through our senses.

At the same time, the author's real background seems to be in Judaism. It has been argued that his knowledge of Plato's system came not through direct acquaintance with Greek thinking, but through knowledge of the work of a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher like Philo, who flourished in the early years of the Christian era at Alexandria in Egypt. But he also seems to have been familiar with the way Jewish teachers in Palestine interpreted the scriptures, and some of his most distinctive imagery was very popular in various groups on the fringes of Judaism. The Qumrân community expected the coming of a Messiah who, like Jesus in Hebrews, would be a high priest. They also had considerable interest in the figure of Melchizedek and, like the writer of Hebrews, had a particular fascination with the rituals of the Day of Atonement. This has led some scholars to suggest that Hebrews was written to Christians who had come under the influence of the community at Qumrân, though some of these notions also appear in other Jewish documents such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (second century AD), while purification ceremonies like those mentioned in Hebrews 6:2 were observed by many groups in the Jewish community.

Readers

Since it is impossible to make a clear identification of the author of Hebrews, it is unrealistic to imagine that we can be certain who its first readers might have been. But there are a number of indications in the book itself that can give some impression of the sort of people they probably were.

The title ‘to the Hebrews’ clearly implies that they were Jewish Christians, though since this title is not part of the actual book but was appended for convenience much later there is no guarantee of its accuracy and some prefer to regard its recipients as Gentile Christians. Against that, it is not easy to see why non-Jewish Christians should have had such a detailed interest in the sacrificial system of ancient Israel, whereas for Jewish believers these rituals were all God-given and it is obvious why they would have some significant questions about their continued relevance. At first glance it might also seem likely that this topic would be of most interest for the inhabitants of Jerusalem where the temple was a feature of everyday life, and some have suggested that this must be where Hebrews originated. Against this it can be argued that the readers of Hebrews seem to have been reasonably well-off (6:10; 10:34) whereas all the evidence suggests the Jerusalem church was relatively poor. There is the further fact – surprising in view of its subject matter – that Hebrews nowhere actually mentions the temple. Instead the focus is on the worship associated with the tent of worship (tabernacle) used by Moses and the Israelites in their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Exodus 35–40) – something that might suggest the readers approached this topic through the narratives of the Pentateuch rather than from first-hand experience of the temple and its rituals. That would at least open the possibility that they were Hellenist Jewish Christians living somewhere in the wider empire.

The recipients of Hebrews also seem to have been faced with some kind of persecution (10:32–34) though at the time of writing, unlike some of the early Jerusalem Christians, they had ‘not yet had to resist to the point of being killed’

(12:4), but that seemed as if it might soon be a distinct possibility.

The book of Hebrews gives the impression that it is not addressed to an entire church, but to a group within a church. In 5:12–14 the readers are criticized because they have not yet realized their God-given potential to be teachers – a function that not every Christian would expect to have. Then 10:25 could be taken to suggest that they were reluctant to meet with other Christians, while 13:24 asks them to convey ‘greetings to all your leaders and to all God’s people’. It has been suggested that Hebrews may have been addressed to some sectarian group mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, perhaps the Colossian heretics who certainly were fascinated by the role of angels and some aspects of Jewish ritual practices. However, their underlying worldview suggests that they were not approaching these matters from the perspective of normative Judaism but were simply utilizing them as a way to achieve quite different objectives, something that would distinguish them from the concerns of Hebrews.

The reference in 13:24 implies that the recipients of Hebrews lived in Italy, perhaps in Rome. The statement that ‘the believers from Italy send you their greetings’ places the author in the company of a group of Italian Christians who wished to be remembered by their friends at home. If this was in fact in Rome, then certainly the circumstances of the church there do have some interesting similarities to the situation envisaged in Hebrews. The last chapter of Romans shows that in the late fifties the Roman church was not one unified congregation, but a collection of separate, though not unrelated ‘house churches’ (Romans 16:3–15). Other evidence from the Jewish community in Rome suggests that as the gospel was proclaimed in different synagogues, they made different responses to it and formed Christian congregations distinguished by their various viewpoints on questions connected with traditional Jewish observances. We also know that the Jews of Rome had a close interest in some of the ideas that feature among various fringe sects within Judaism and which also surface in Hebrews.

Date

Suggested dates range from the early sixties to the end of the first century. On no account can it have been written later than about AD 90, for it is referred to in 1 Clement which was written in Rome no later than AD 96. A number of considerations are involved in fixing a more precise date:

Some have pointed to the statement in 2:3 that ‘The Lord himself first announced this salvation, and those who heard him proved to us that it is true.’ They argue that this shows the author was a second- or third-generation Christian, in which case an appropriate date might be betweenAD80 and 90. But we have already seen that this is not a necessary inference from that verse.

It has also been pointed out that the book seems to emphasize the human character of Jesus. It is natural to suppose that this might have been a subject of controversy at the time, which in turn would most obviously take us to the Docetic arguments about Jesus’ humanity and divinity that emerged towards the end of the first century. But when we examine such references closely many of them are seen to be based on the outline of Jesus’ life found in the gospels, and they are used in Hebrews to provoke a specific recollection of Jesus’ behaviour and actions as an example and encouragement (2:14; 4:15; 5:7–9; 13:12). There are significant differences between this and the way that 1 John opposes Docetism.

There are few signs of the interests of the institutional church in Hebrews. The tension between present experience (1:2; 6:5) and future hope (9:28; 10:34–38) that was so characteristic of the age of the apostles is still found, and there is no more church hierarchy in view than may be suggested by the vague title ‘leaders’ (13:24).

Hebrews appears to assume that the worship described in the Torah was still in existence, referring to ‘the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year’ and suggesting that if they really delivered what they promised ‘would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshippers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin?’ (10:1–3,NRSV). These and similar statements suggest that the temple in Jerusalem was still standing, and if that is the case then the book can be dated beforeAD70. It may be objected that Hebrews refers not to the temple but to the tent of worship in the desert, but the regulations were the same in each case and the Old Testament contains no temple regulations as such: Solomon’s temple is just assumed to have taken over the pattern of tabernacle worship laid down in the Torah. If the temple had ceased to function when Hebrews was written, it really is difficult to understand why that fact would not have been mentioned as it would have provided the ultimate confirmation of the whole argument of this book.

If Hebrews was directed to readers in Rome, then the statement that they had not yet given their lives for the gospel would seem to point to a time before Nero’s persecution reached its climax inAD64. The earlier persecution that they had suffered could then have been connected with the disturbances that led Claudius to expel the Jewish people from Rome for a time inAD48.

We may tentatively conclude that Hebrews was written by an unknown author in the period leading up to Nero’s persecution. Its first readers were a group of Hellenist Jewish Christians in Rome who were observing the rituals of traditional Judaism to secure the protection that the empire gave to Jews. The author of Hebrews deplored this attitude: in his opinion, not only were they betraying other Christians, but their acquiescence in Jewish rituals was also in effect a denial of their faith in Christ. If they truly wished to serve him, they must be prepared to stand up and be counted as his followers, whatever the cost might be.

CHAPTER 19

COVENANT AND CONFIDENCE: 1 PETER AND REVELATION

Christians and the covenant

The debates in the early church about Jewish morality and ritual were symptomatic of more fundamental underlying issues in the self-understanding of the earliest Christian communities. In Old Testament times, to be a member of the people of God had not been simply a matter of behaving in the same way as other like-minded people. It also involved inclusion in the covenant relationship established between God and Israel's ancestor Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–14; 22:16–18) and reiterated and extended through Moses (Exodus 19:5–8; 20:1–24:18). This relationship was rooted in God's concern and care for this people: Abraham was called from Mesopotamia and found a new homeland not because of any moral or spiritual superiority that he may have possessed, but simply as a gift of divine generosity. His descendants later emerged from the shattering experience of the exodus not because of their own moral perfection but through the care of a loving God. On the basis of these undeserved acts of kindness Abraham and his family were promised a great and prosperous future (Genesis 15:1–6), but in order to bring that to fruition they were to live by the same standards of justice that had inspired God's generosity in the first place. By way of response to this and as a mark of acceptance of this way of being, circumcision became the outward sign of this new covenant relationship (Genesis 17:9–14). The same elements recur in the covenant relationship enacted between God and Israel by Moses at Mount Sinai. Acting out of justice and generosity, God had rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and they were to respond by embracing the same standard of justice as expounded in moral precepts such as are found in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:4–8, 20:1–17), and the outward sign of their commitment to this new way of life was to be displayed through maintenance of the various lifestyle and ritual regulations contained in the books of Leviticus and Numbers.

When Christians claimed that Jesus had come to fulfil the ancient promises, these are the ones that were in mind. Moreover, the Christians themselves believed that what they were experiencing through the presence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit made them the heirs of Abraham himself. This is why questions about keeping the Law and carrying out rituals like circumcision

became such important issues in the life of the church, for on a plain reading of the Hebrew scriptures this was the appropriate way for anyone (whether born as a Jew or a Gentile) to demonstrate their commitment to God's way of doing things. At the start this was not an issue, for the first Christians were already Jewish believers and naturally followed the expectations of their faith community in such matters. But when Paul and others accepted into the church Gentiles who had not been circumcised, and who saw no reason at all for observing such requirements of the Law, what might previously have been an interesting theological discussion between Jews who were Christians and those who were not, suddenly became the focus of a burning practical issue. Traditional Jewish thinking suggested that people who would not obey the Torah could not expect to be included in the promises of the covenants. But the activity of the Holy Spirit among these Gentile believers seemed to be no less remarkable than what was going on in the lives of those Christians who were also faithful Jews (Acts 10:44–48). Paul was one of the first Christian preachers to be faced with this problem. On a pragmatic level he was quite sure that circumcision and keeping the Law should not be required of Gentile Christians. At the same time, however, the Old Testament had made it perfectly clear that to share in the blessings promised by God a person must become a member of Abraham's family. Paul did not wish to deny that the scriptures were the word of God, and his opponents were not slow to remind him that being a member of Abraham's family meant circumcision and obedience to the Law. When Paul tackled this problem in Galatians, he argued that the blessings promised by God to Abraham did not come to fruition because he kept the Law (Galatians 3:17), which did not exist in his day, but was instead a matter of faith: 'Abraham believed and was blessed; so all who believe are blessed as he was' (Galatians 3:9). Circumcision was an external sign to indicate that a person was committed to observing the Law, but if the Law was now redundant then circumcision had also lost its value (Galatians 5:2–12). What should matter to the Christian is 'faith that works through love' (Galatians 5:6).

Themes in 1 Peter

Paul's argument has already been dealt with in some detail, but it is important to keep in mind here because the same issues also surface in 1 Peter, though in a different form. In this letter Abraham is mentioned only in passing and in a different context altogether (3:6), with no sign of the complex theological arguments that dominate Galatians and Romans. The conclusion, however, is the same, for 1 Peter conveys the clear conviction that Gentile Christians have been incorporated as full members into 'the people of God' whose story is rooted in the covenants of ancient Israel (2:9–10). It also asserts that they have achieved this position as a result of their response in faith to what God has done for them. Like the ethnic family of Abraham, Gentile Christians owe their knowledge of God not to their own piety or insight but to God's undeserved love and generosity. In Israel's case this had been demonstrated particularly in the exodus; for Christians 'it was the costly sacrifice of Christ, who was like a lamb without defect or flaw' (1:19). 1 Peter was not written in the same controversial context as Paul's letter to the Galatians. But that only makes more striking its insistence that Christians – even Gentiles – are now the true 'family of Abraham' independently of the Law, for it shows how this issue was soon settled in the church along the lines that Paul had argued.

The believer’s status (1:1–12)

These themes appear in the very first sentence of 1 Peter, with the greeting ‘To God’s chosen people in the Dispersion throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia’ (author’s translation). This opening is similar to that of the book of James, where ‘God’s people in the Dispersion’ most likely indicates Jewish Messianic believers. In the case of 1 Peter, however, there can be no doubt that the recipients are Gentile Christians with no previous Jewish connections and living in various provinces of Asia Minor (1:18; 2:10; 3:6; 4:3–4). The initial greeting is followed by a thanksgiving and then the letter turns to exhortation. Peter’s readers are encouraged to celebrate God’s goodness to them ‘even though for a little while you may have to suffer various trials’ (1:6, author’s translation). The writer assures them that such trials are insignificant when set against God’s power. Christians already know something of this power in the new life that they enjoy through Jesus. They can also look forward to ‘the Day when Jesus Christ is revealed’ when they will meet him face to face (1:7). Simple Gentile believers may find this difficult to understand – even angels cannot fully do so – but what is happening to them now, and the destiny that is waiting for them in the future, is all part of God’s plan as first revealed in the Hebrew scriptures.

Christian maturity (1:13–2:10)

The writer then goes on to remind readers that acceptance of the good news about Jesus imposes responsibilities as well as bestowing privileges. Faith in Christ is not merely a private experience but something to be shared with others, in deed as well as word. Jesus' death and resurrection has 'set you free from the worthless manner of life handed down by your ancestors' (1:18), and the recollection of that should lead Christians to obey God, and share God's love with other people. They should also grow and develop in their Christian experience, being as eager for spiritual nourishment as babies are for their mothers' milk so they can 'come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ' (2:5). As Christians mature in this way, they will demonstrate how they are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (2:9, NRSV) – terminology taken from Exodus 19:6 where ancient Israel is described in identical terms.

There is not another passage of comparable length in the whole New Testament where so much imagery that originally described Abraham and his descendants is applied to the Christian church as in some way being the 'new Israel'. But there are also interesting connections here with Paul's thinking. The analogy of the church as a building constructed out of living stones (one of which, the cornerstone, is Jesus himself) is not dissimilar to Paul's description of the church as a living body made up of many parts (the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12:12–31). Indeed, Paul may well have been familiar with the same imagery himself, for in Romans he writes of Christians offering 'a living sacrifice' that will bring glory to God (Romans 12:1–2). When Peter describes all believers as 'priests' he is saying the same as Paul when he declared that all Christians had a God-given ability that they must share with the church at large. The fact that they use entirely different language from each other only serves to emphasize how important this concept of shared ministry was to the first Christian communities.

Christian behaviour (2:11–4:19)

Peter goes on to remind his readers that, as God's people, they have committed themselves to living by the values and standards deriving from God's justice, love, and generosity, and as a result they are 'strangers and refugees' in the cultural value-systems of the Hellenistic world (2:11). Their true allegiance is to God and everything they do should bear witness to divine qualities. They may have to deal with undeserved suffering (2:19), but they can look to the example of Jesus for inspiration (2:23). The same principles should determine how Christians behave at home: Christian women should be ready to share the love of Christ with their spouses, and men must treat their partners with respect and affirmation. In a word, every believer should follow the example and teaching of Jesus (3:8–9). Peter knew that it is never easy to behave like this, especially when suffering from unjust persecution. For the Christian, it involves putting God first so that lifestyles are not controlled by personal whims and fancies, but by God's standards and values (4:7). Putting God first will always be worthwhile in the end. Suffering is just a temporary thing and Christians must look beyond it to the judgment of God when all things will be put right. 1 Peter assures its readers that they can trust themselves to God's care, for God's promises never fail (4:19).

Serving Christ (5:1–14)

Finally, Peter gives advice to those who are, like himself, ‘elders’ or ‘shepherds’ in the church. They should not be domineering but ‘examples to the flock’ (5:3), recognizing that the church will flourish only when all its members have ‘put on the apron of humility’ to serve one another (5:5). By doing so they are following the example of Jesus, who himself had worn the apron of a slave to wash his disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). But above all, they must not lose their trust in God in the midst of persecution. Even this hardship can be transformed in the light of God’s intentions for the people of the covenant: ‘After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who calls you to share in eternal glory in union with Christ, will personally perfect you and give you firmness, strength, and a sure foundation’ (5:10).

A hidden liturgy?

The style of 1 Peter has none of the urgency or passion of Paul's writings, though it is clearly a real letter written to actual individuals in a specific set of circumstances, in this case to encourage them at a time of persecution. It has been suggested that in doing this the author has incorporated statements that would have been familiar from the worship liturgies of the early church, as a way of reminding readers of their own faith and how that was reflected in their regular participation in worship. Specifically, it has been proposed that the central part of the letter (1:3–4:11) consists of liturgical material whose original context would have been a service of baptism. Several features are claimed to support this:

This section of the letter seems to be self-contained, with a conclusion in 4:11 that is a much fuller benediction than the one now at the end of chapter five. The author also says in 5:12 that he is writing a 'brief letter' and since the whole of 1 Peter is hardly 'brief' the actual letter that he wrote may only run from 4:12 to 5:14, while the rest of the book is an account of the church's worship.

Baptism is mentioned only in one obscure passage (3:18–22). This may be thought a good reason for doubting its importance, but in this passage Noah's deliverance from a great flood in Genesis 7–9 is said to be 'a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you' (3:21). The emphasis on 'now' suggests to some that those addressed had only just been baptized. Others have claimed to be able to discern subtle changes in the language towards the end of the first chapter, and they argue that the act of baptism had actually taken place between 1:21 and 1:22. On this understanding, this section of 1 Peter can be read as a litany for a service of baptism, complete with hymns, responses, prayers, a sermon, and a benediction. Other evidence for this is drawn from the exhortation to 'Be like newborn babies, always thirsty for the pure spiritual milk' (2:2). TheApostolic

Traditionascribed to Hippolytus describes how towards the end of the second century a cup of milk and honey was given to Christians who had just been baptized, to remind them of the land promised to Israel (‘a land flowing with milk and honey’, Exodus 3:8,NRSV). 1 Peter mentions neither the honey nor the land, and the milk is described as ‘pure and spiritual’ which rather suggests it should be understood metaphorically rather than literally. But another connection with theApostolic Traditionis in 1 Peter 3:3 with the insistence that a person’s character has nothing to do withexternals such as hair styles or jewellery or clothing. Later evidence describes how women removed jewellery and clothing and rearranged their hair before being baptized, though the emphasis in 1 Peter is not so much on externals as on the positive moral virtues that should be found in the Christian.

There are a number of places where 1 Peter uses language and imagery taken from the Passover story. For example, Christ is ‘a lamb without defect or flaw’ (1:19), just as the Passover lambs had been (Exodus 12:5), and Christians are told to ‘gird up your minds’ (1:13,RSV), in the same way as the Israelites fastened up their clothing on Passover night (Exodus 12:11). There are also numerous echoes of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers in 2:1–10 suggesting that Peter was intentionally drawing parallels between the experience of his readers and ancient Israel in their journey to a new life – a theme that came to be explicitly linked with baptism in particular, the ideal time for which (according to Tertullian, writing at the beginning of the third century) was Easter (Passover).

Some scholars propose that this section of 1 Peter contains an extensive baptismal liturgy. There are certainly clear allusions to Christian initiation, though the evidence falls short of demonstrating that the letter contains such an account of ancient worship. The occurrence of themes that seem relevant to newly baptized Christians is probably due to the fact that Peter, like Paul, wanted to remind his readers of what was involved in being a Christian. To do this, it would have been natural to recall the commitment they had made when they first came to faith in Christ. There is no reason to doubt that he would repeat the sort of things that he was in the habit of saying to new converts, but that does not lead to the conclusion that he was incorporating an actual liturgy in what is

clearly a real letter. Someone who has worked out effective ways of expressing things will always tend to repeat the same ideas in different contexts, and the most plausible explanation for these references to baptismal practice is that Peter regularly used these themes and this language. There is good reason to think that this letter may well incorporate terminology that had been carefully crafted in liturgy, in much the same way as Paul includes a poem or hymn in Philippians 2:6–11, but it is a big leap from that to the conclusion reached by some liturgical scholars, that the entire book comprises a worship manual for a baptismal service.

1 Peter in context

1 Peter was well-known and widely read in the church from quite early times. 1 Clement refers to it (AD 96), as also does Polycarp (AD 70–155), while Irenaeus stated towards the end of the second century that it was written by the apostle Peter himself. There are good reasons for accepting this view of its authorship:

Much of its teaching is exactly what might be expected from a disciple of Jesus. Many aspects echo the teaching of Jesus himself, sometimes following it quite closely. The author contrasts the readers' knowledge of Jesus, which was second-hand, with his own first-hand knowledge, and he seems to have witnessed both the trials (2:21–24) and the crucifixion of Jesus (5:1). Some scholars also believe that certain passages contain allusions to gospel narratives in which Peter was particularly involved. Others, however, have claimed that if this letter was the work of Peter then we would expect to read much more about Jesus. But this argument depends on the mistaken assumption that authors will write everything they know in everything they write. We should also remember that Peter's reminiscences of the life and teaching of Jesus may well have been recorded in a comprehensive way already, in the gospel of Mark.

There are also a number of similarities between 1 Peter and the speeches of Peter in the book of Acts. Jesus' cross is called 'the tree' in Peter's speech to the Jewish rulers (Acts 5:30) and in his sermon to Cornelius (10:39), and the same terminology occurs here in 1 Peter 2:24. In 1 Peter 2:22–24 Jesus is referred to in the language of the Servant Songs of the book of Isaiah, and according to Acts, Peter consistently called Jesus 'the Servant of God' in his earliest preaching (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:25–30). Jesus is also linked with the stone mentioned in Psalm 118:22 by Peter in his defence before the religious authorities, and again in 1 Peter 2:4, while the emphasis on the fulfilment of Old Testament promises in Acts 3:18–24 is very similar to 1 Peter 1:10–12.

There is no sign in 1 Peter of the concerns and interests of the later institutional church. There is still a tension between the present experience of God working in the lives of Christian believers (1:8–9, 23) and what God will accomplish in the future with the return of Jesus himself (1:3–5, 7, 13; 4:13; 5:4). Nor is there any evidence of a developed hierarchy in church organization, with the consistent emphasis on all Christians being ‘priests’, and the leaders of the church simply referred to as ‘elders’ and ‘shepherds’ (5:1–4).

Similarities between the teaching of Jesus and Peter

Christians should have an alert and watchful attitude

Christians should have the priviledge of calling God ‘Father’

Christian conduct should cause non-believers to praise God

Christians should not pay back evil for evil

There is joy to be had when the Christian is being persecuted for doing what God

We will all have to give an account of ourselves to God on judgment day

If Christians are insulted because they are followers of Jesus, they should be glad

Christians should be characterized by humility, and God will make them great

Because God is caring for them, Christians should not be worried or anxious

Author

There are therefore several good reasons for accepting the ancient view that Peter was the author of this letter. There are however some other considerations that may point in a different direction:

Like Hebrews, 1 Peter is written in an exceptionally fine Greek literary style and it might reasonably be asked whether a Galilean fisherman would be capable of writing like this, especially one who was once described as ‘uneducated and ordinary’ (Acts 4:13, NRSV). However, Peter’s Galilean origins, far from disqualifying him from knowing Greek, would actually point in the opposite direction. Moreover, the statement about Peter’s educational achievements in Acts can hardly be taken literally. It certainly does not indicate that Peter was illiterate. Quite the reverse, for the comment is made by religious leaders who were expressing their amazement at the unexpected eloquence of people who had come from the remote hillsides of Galilee, and who (like Jesus) had not been trained in formal styles of religious speech or teaching. In order to account for the high literary quality of this letter, though, some take the view that Peter is to be associated with the content of the letter but not with its written form. On this view, the fine Greek style would not be Peter’s own but that of Silvanus who is named here as the one who actually wrote the letter (5:12). That of course would be true of most, if not all, Greek letters, which generally were oral communications that were then written up by a scribe using their own style.

Why would Peter have sent a letter to Gentile Christians living in Asia Minor when according to Galatians 2:8 he was an ‘apostle to the Jews’? This question is often raised, but it is scarcely relevant to the matter of authorship. For one thing, Paul appears not to have regarded that sort of statement as a fixed rule, as he himself preached the gospel to many Jews even though his own calling was as ‘apostle to the Gentiles’. We also know that Peter travelled extensively in the wider empire from a relatively early period. Paul mentions this in 1 Corinthians 9:5 and there is no good reason to suppose he could not have visited some of the

places to which this letter was sent. This is the very area where Paul was ‘forbidden’ to go (Acts 16:6–10) and some commentators suggest that was because Peter was already working there. On the other hand, 1 Peter 1:12 seems to draw a distinction between the writer of the epistle and ‘the messengers who announced the Good News’ to its readers, implying that he had not been the one who first took the gospel message to this area.

It has also been argued that 1 Peter is too similar to Paul’s letters to have been written by Peter. But this is hardly convincing evidence against Petrine authorship. It presupposes that Paul was unique in the early church, saying entirely different things from anyone else. We have already argued that this is an unrealistic way to look at Paul, and we also noted good reasons for believing that he and Peter saw eye to eye on most issues. So why should 1 Peter be entirely different from Paul’s writings? In any case, the two are not identical. Stylistically, 1 Peter has the appearance of having been carefully composed as a linear argument, with none of the passion or conversational style of Paul’s letters. It is significant that though the conclusions emerging out of Peter’s teaching on the church and the Old Testament covenants is very similar to Paul’s, in arguing for it 1 Peter uses altogether different language and imagery. All the closest parallels are in their ethical advice which can be found in a similar form not only in Paul but elsewhere in the New Testament, which suggests that a more plausible explanation is that Paul and Peter were both handing on teaching that was widely accepted throughout the early Christian communities.

Date and origin

If Peter did indeed write this letter it must obviously be dated before his death, which took place in the persecution of Christians begun by Nero in AD 64. Dating it more precisely than that depends on the interpretation of the various references to persecution that occur throughout the letter:

In all the organized persecutions of Christians that took place towards the end of the first century, recognition of the emperor's divinity was a crucial test of Christian allegiance. This was clearly not the case in the persecutions envisaged in 1 Peter, as Christians are encouraged to 'respect the Emperor' and to accept his authority, albeit in second place to the authority of God (2:13–17).

The readers of 1 Peter seem to have been surprised to be persecuted (4:12), something that seems unlikely after the persecutions of Nero when suffering was almost the norm.

The statement in 5:8 ('Your enemy, the Devil, roams round like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour') and the reference to 'testing by fire' (1:7) could easily be specific references to Nero's persecution itself. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Christians 'were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night' (Annals 15.44).

Peter and the church in Rome

After the stories of the early chapters of Acts, the course of the rest of Peter's life is unknown to us. Apart from Paul's reference to his missionary activity (1 Corinthians 9:5), and what is at best a cryptic mention of his death in John 21:18–19, the New Testament reveals nothing more about him. 1 Peter, of course, is evidence that he was at one time in Rome, but it also provides no further personal details. It was not long, however, before Christians began to enquire about Peter more specifically. Just as they wanted to know about Andrew, Matthew, Philip, and other disciples of Jesus, so they wanted to know what had become of the disciple whom Jesus had once called 'the Rock' on whose foundation he said the church would be built (Matthew 16:17–19).

The second-century Acts of Peter purport to tell of how Peter came at an early stage to the city of Rome and there established a large and thriving Christian community. Like Jesus, he performed many miracles, though his progress was continuously hindered by a hostile magician called Simon who, among other things, had the power to fly unaided. According to this document, Peter's mission to Rome was cut short by the events of Nero's persecution. His friends advised him to leave the city and escape martyrdom, thereby freeing himself for yet greater exploits in proclaiming the Christian message. But as he was leaving the city in disguise, Peter saw Jesus himself entering Rome, and asked Jesus where he was going. 'And the Lord said to him, "I am coming to Rome to be crucified"…. And Peter came to himself… he returned to Rome rejoicing and giving praise to the Lord.' On his return, Peter himself was crucified, insisting that he should be hung upside-down on the cross.

The details of this story are almost certainly fictitious, though the core of it is probably true for there is no reason to doubt either that Peter visited Rome and played an important part in the work of the church there, or that he was put to death in the persecution started by Nero. 1 Clement 5 connects the deaths of both

Peter and Paul with this period, and before the end of the second century the graves of these apostles had become a place of pilgrimage (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.25.5–7). At a later date, when the emperor Constantine became a Christian, he constructed a more elaborate shrine at the spot (probably in about AD 333), and today the Basilica of St Peter stands on the same site. Archaeological investigation has confirmed this general account, for not only has Constantine's monument been discovered, but traces of the second-century structure have also been found. Further remains of bones and early graves, some going back to the first century, have also been unearthed, though there is no agreement among archaeologists about their significance, with some claiming that this is the actual grave of Peter himself while others argue that these graves are not even Christian. Whatever the truth about that, it is certain that Peter died as a martyr in Rome during the persecution of Nero, and that his grave lies somewhere on the site now occupied by St Peter's Basilica. There is however no evidence to show that he was the founder of the Roman church, though (along with Paul) he had some connections with it from an early stage, and it is therefore not surprising that he soon became its patron saint.

Taken together, these indications suggest that perhaps 1 Peter was written as Nero's persecution was in its early stages. There is no certain evidence that it eventually spread to Asia Minor but even if it did not, the official persecution in Rome would certainly have encouraged people elsewhere to harass the Christians in their own cities. We do know that Peter was in Rome at the time. The term 'Babylon' used in this letter was a favourite code word for Rome among the early Christians. As Peter saw what was happening there, he felt it would only be a matter of time before such a great evil spread to other parts of the empire. He wanted Christians to know that when their time of trial came they were not alone: others were suffering too. But most important of all, God would not fail to care for them, for they were the covenant people.

The seven churches of the book of Revelation.

Revelation: confidence in the face of adversity

Peter was not the first writer to address the problem of unjust suffering. It was a question that had come to be increasingly important in the centuries just before the birth of Jesus, as is evidenced by the many apocalyptic writings produced between about 100 BC and AD 100. Some distinctive features of this style of writing have already been outlined in chapter 2 of this book. They were generally pessimistic works, despairing of God ever being able to put things right in this world, and therefore laying more emphasis on the heavenly world instead, and containing reports of visions and dreams in which God's plans were revealed to those who needed to know. On the face of it, the kind of escapism typified by these writings seems quite foreign to the outlook of the New Testament. But there is one New Testament book that has clearly been profoundly influenced by the style, if not the thinking, of these apocalyptic dreamers: the book of Revelation.

Its dramatic descriptions of monsters, colours, angels, and demons have inspired countless artists throughout the centuries, though all the great Bible scholars of the past found it somewhat bemusing. Among the Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther found it an offensive piece of work with very little to say about Christ, and John Calvin also had considerable doubts about its value. It is entirely absent from Orthodox liturgies and is only read very occasionally in other churches. In the Revised Common Lectionary that forms the basis of Bible reading for mainline churches, seventeen out of Revelation's twenty-two chapters never feature at all, and even of those that do, none appear in their entirety. Many readers are happy to ignore it and even seminary students can get their degrees without paying much attention to it. It is not surprising that Revelation should seem a difficult and complicated book for most people today do not generally think in the same terms as Jewish apocalyptists, and find their secret language and visions to be both meaningless and bizarre. Many Christians are uneasy with the implication that God has no relevance to the world in which we live, and they find it difficult to imagine that God's sole intention could be to destroy human society and set up some sort of other-worldly kingdom instead. At the opposite end of the theological and cultural spectrum are substantial numbers of

people (Christians and others) who think of this book in an entirely different way, and far from regarding it as irrelevant to faith in the twenty-first century claim that it reveals the future course of history, and that contemporary events are actually foreshadowed in its pages. Millions of Christians regard this book as an accurate description of things to come, including graphic predictions that would not be out of place in a horror movie: the arrival of the ‘antichrist’ and a thousand years of ‘tribulation’, though faithful believers will allegedly escape all these calamities when the ‘rapture’ transports them into some other world. It is easy to understand the appeal of such escapism in a world that is increasingly unpredictable, and the origins of such speculative interpretations are to be found in earlier periods of cultural upheaval, most notably the decades following the French Revolution. John Nelson Darby (1800–82) was an Irish Anglican priest whose fascination with mystical speculation about other worlds led him not only to start his own sect (the Plymouth Brethren) based on this future expectation of an imminent ‘rapture’ and the end of the world, but also to translate his own version of the Bible that would support it. When Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843–1921) incorporated this understanding in his Scofield Reference Bible (published by the prestigious Oxford University Press in 1909), its wider dissemination was assured and subsequent upheavals in international relationships throughout the twentieth century ensured its continuing popularity. Some recent world leaders are even on record as having allowed this way of understanding the Bible to influence, if not determine, their foreign policy.

In spite of its obvious fascination, others have dismissed the book of Revelation and argued that it should never have been included in the New Testament at all, regarding it as a book of Jewish sectarianism and not authentically Christian. Like many opinions encountered in previous chapters, this one is based on the assumption that Judaism and Christianity do not belong together – an assumption that has been shown to be entirely false. The truth is that the sort of despair and pessimism about human history that is found in many apocalyptic writings is fundamentally at odds with the outlook not only of the New Testament, but of the Old Testament as well. The biblical writers never hid from the tragic realities of human experience, but they had no doubt that God can and does meet people even in the tough events of normal life. This is at the very centre of the gospel, with the belief that through Jesus God personally shared in human existence, thereby affirming the value of life in this world as something to be embraced and celebrated. The book of Revelation actually shares this

positive Christian emphasis on God's involvement in human affairs. But that is not the only feature that distinguishes it from other apocalypses of the time. For though the language and imagery in the book follows the stylistic genre of apocalyptic, it does not apply this format slavishly.

Unlike other apocalyptic writings Revelation names both its author and its first readers. It was written by a person called John and sent 'From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia', namely the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Revelation 1:4). This section is discussed in more detail in the next chapter of this book, and consists of prophetic messages to communities that are addressed in quite specific terms, with particular incidents and individuals mentioned by name. Such open self-confidence was never shared by other apocalyptic writers. On the contrary, they were generally too afraid of their persecutors to identify themselves in this way. Some members of these churches were indeed undergoing significant persecution, but that was evidently not a good enough reason for concealing the true nature of their Christian faith.

Even in those parts of the book that are most similar to other apocalyptic writings, John's visions are always closely linked to his experience of life in the church. His vision came to him 'on the Lord's day', perhaps in the course of Christian worship, and the contents of the visions have many references to the worship of the church, its confessions of faith, prayers, and hymns. For examples, see Revelation 1:5–6; 4:8, 11; 5:9–10; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 19:1–2, 5–8; 22:13.

Revelation looks forward to a future intervention of God in the affairs of this world rather than some other 'spiritual' world, and its understanding is fundamentally different from that of other apocalyptists who without exception regarded this world and all its affairs as irretrievably evil. To them, history was a meaningless enigma and the sooner its course was stopped, the better. In this respect, the writer of Revelation is more in line with the prophets of ancient

Israel than with the apocalyptic writers of his own day. Whenever the prophets spoke of the coming of a ‘Day of the Lord’ when God would intervene in a final and decisive way, they always believed that this would be a continuation of what God was already doing in the present order of things and the outcome would be renewal rather than devastation (Isaiah 2:6–22; Hosea 2:14–23; Joel 2:28–3:21). The God who would inaugurate a new world order in the future was also the God who could be known here and now in the struggles of daily life. Traditional apocalyptic writers generally rejected this view, feeling that they could make no sense of their own present experience. But like the earlier prophets, the book of Revelation makes a clear link between what God is doing in history now, and what God will do in the future. Indeed, the entire meaning of God’s plan for the future of humanity is to be found in a historical event, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus himself, identified here as ‘the Lamb of God’ (Revelation 5). Far from the suffering of Christians being a meaningless interlude, John declares it to be one of the most powerful responses against all forms of evil (Revelation 12:10–12).

Given that the very first Greek word of the entire book is apokalupsis (‘apocalypse’, meaning ‘revelation’), it can hardly be denied that this is what it claims to be, though it does not follow slavishly the pattern of other apocalypses known to us. Its message is expressed through conventional language and vivid Old Testament imagery but its content goes beyond the literary form of apocalyptic writing and offers a distinctive and positive Christian narrative regarding the presence of evil in the affairs of human life.

The book and its message

The first three chapters of Revelation are similar to many other New Testament writings: they contain seven letters to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. In one way they are not real letters like those written by Paul, for they are written in the name of the risen Jesus and John says that their content was given to him in a vision, just like the rest of the book. But they deal with very down-to-earth matters, and show a detailed knowledge of these people and their environment. Their churches were involved in disputes over Christian beliefs, their commitment to Christ was wavering, and as a result they were in no position to face up to the challenge of sustained persecution. To do that, they needed to be whole-heartedly committed. This is a message that is repeated many times in the New Testament, and it is not significantly different from that of 1 Peter.

But the second part of the book (chapters 4–22) is quite different. Here we come face-to-face with the language and imagery of apocalyptic writings. No longer do the visions seem to relate to real events and people, but instead they introduce monsters and dragons in a quick succession of terrifying events. The whole section is introduced in chapters 4 and 5 by a vision of heaven which sets the scene for what follows. Here the author lays out the underlying assumptions of the way in which he understands God's workings in history. God is the one who is 'high and exalted' in absolute majesty and holiness (4:2), and men and women (represented by the twenty-four elders in the divine court) find their true significance as they worship and serve God. But they are quite incapable of reflecting every aspect of God's personality, and when a sealed scroll containing God's revelation to the world is produced, the elders are unable to open it to reveal its contents. After an angel has searched unsuccessfully in heaven, on earth, and in the underworld, God's own heavenly deliverer appears on the scene in the person of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ (5:1–8). This is a powerful and impressive presentation of the central importance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the Christian understanding of life and its meaning. It is significant that at the very beginning of his visions, John links the future destiny of the world and its inhabitants with God's self-revelation in the historical events

of the life of Jesus.

The chapters that follow then present a series of visions focused on the same theme as we have noted throughout the other New Testament books. The central concern here once again is divine justice, only this time the focus is not on those who commit to living their lives in harmony with that, but on those who are implacably opposed to the values of love and generosity. Many of the descriptions here are quite horrific, and much of the language in which God's judgment is described comes from the story of the plagues in Egypt in the Old Testament book of Exodus (Exodus 6:28–12:36). This gives a clue to the point that John is making, for in the exodus story God's main purpose had not been the plagues: they were merely a prelude to the salvation that was planned for the people of Israel, and through them for the whole world. So too in Revelation, the main point of the book is not to be found in God's judgment upon evil, but in the conviction that God is now in the process of bringing to birth a new world from which injustice will be completely banished. In this new world, people will enjoy a fresh and unfettered freedom to know God in a direct way: 'God will be with them in person.… God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared…' (21:3–4, author's translation).

There have been many attempts to arrange the visions of Revelation according to some schematic pattern. One popular suggestion is that, with the exception of chapters 4 and 5, and the description of the new heavens and earth, the whole book is arranged in a pattern of seven sections of sevens:

Seven seals (6:1–8:1)

Seven trumpets (8:2–11:19)

Seven visions of the dragon and his kingdom (12:1–13:18)

Seven visions of the coming of the Lamb of God (14:1–20)

Seven bowls of God's anger against evil (15:1–16:21)

Seven visions of the fall of 'Babylon' (17:1–19:10)

Seven visions of the end (19:11–21:4)

However they might be arranged, these visions present a kaleidoscopic picture of how God's justice will finally banish the powers of evil. It is the work not of an abstract thinker but of a great artist, and like a good artist John depicts the same subject from a number of different perspectives in order to reinforce the overall impression that he wishes to create.

Making sense of the message

Because of the many allusions to specific events and people known to the writer and his readers, it is difficult today to appreciate fully every detail of these visions. But their impact on the original readers of the book of Revelation is not difficult to imagine. John assured his Christian readers that their present suffering was only temporary (2:10; 3:10), for their great enemy ‘Babylon’ (a term which Revelation, like 1 Peter, uses to refer to Rome) would ultimately come under the judgment of God (Revelation 18). God alone is the Lord of history, with a personal interest in the destiny not only of nations but of ordinary people as well: injustice and evil would not be allowed to win the day.

This view of Revelation is consistent with the way we have tried to appreciate the other New Testament books, by setting it in its context and attempting to understand what it might have meant for those who first received it. This approach to understanding Revelation is sometimes called the ‘preterist’ view (from the Latin word praeteritum, meaning ‘referring to the past’), and it seems the most obvious approach to take. Over the centuries, however, the seemingly mysterious character of Revelation’s message has encouraged people to seek out other hidden meanings within its pages. During the early centuries of the Christian era, it was frequently regarded as a symbolic presentation of some of the great truths of the Christian faith. Origen and Augustine understood its imagery to be a picturesque account of the principles of God’s working throughout history, and saw its weird descriptions of persons, battles, and beasts not as real events but as a dramatic presentation of the age-long strife between God and the forces of evil. This way of reading the book can be helpful: not only does it make sense of many of the most difficult passages, but it also succeeds in relating it to the needs of its first readers, who needed to be assured of the successful outcome of the struggle in which they were engaged.

But during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a significant body of popular opinion came to look at Revelation in a different way. These so-called ‘futurists’ argued that its real meaning is connected with events that are still in

the future even now, and its full significance will become plain only to that generation which finds itself living in ‘the last days’. Some even suggested that the seven letters with which the book opens are not real letters at all, but part of a detailed clairvoyant insight given to John consisting of descriptions of seven successive ages (or ‘dispensations’) of church history, reaching from the first century up to the end of time. This understanding was popularized by John Nelson Darby who proposed that his own generation had reached the stage of the seventh and final letter (to Laodicea, 3:14–22), and that this would last until it is brought to a conclusion with the end of the world as we know it. This view still has many followers who believe themselves to be living in the last days, though it presents some obvious difficulties:

The most striking problem is the fact that since Darby’s time many generations have come and gone and in spite of their evangelical fervour – with some even putting a date on the end of the world – they have all been wrong.

Then there is the fact that Jesus himself explicitly warned his disciples not to indulge in this kind of speculation: ‘No one knows… when that day and hour will come – neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son…’ (Matthew 24:36). It is therefore hardly likely that God would have given the information only to a select band of modern readers of the book of Revelation.

Another serious objection is that according to this view, the book of Revelation must have been meaningless and irrelevant to the people for whom it was ostensibly written. If these letters to the seven churches were not real letters, related to the concerns of actual people, that would make Revelation quite different from every other book in the whole of the Bible. It also shares the general pessimism about existence in this world that was common in apocalyptic literature, but was quite foreign to New Testament thinking.

There is no justification for regarding either Revelation or any other book of the

Bible as a blueprint for the future course of world events. That is not to suggest that the Christian faith has no expectation of a better world at some future date, for the whole New Testament presents the clear conviction that there will be a point at which God must deal decisively with the forces of evil, at which time the kingdom of peace and justice announced by Jesus will become a lasting and tangible reality. The book of Revelation confirms that conviction by assuring its readers that this world belongs to God and not to the forces of evil. Through the use of vivid and powerful imagery it emphasizes that God will act to put things right, no matter how long such action may seem to be delayed. At that time, people will not simply be able to make a new start but will have a part in the new world, where injustice, suffering, and evil have no further place. Those who reject the values of this new world will have no part in it (Revelation 21:27), though it is not God's intention that any should be excluded, but rather that all should respond to the offer of a new way of being: 'Come, whoever is thirsty; accept the water of life as a gift, whoever wants it' (Revelation 22:17).

Author and date

Revelation is the only New Testament book that was explicitly dated by any writers in the early centuries. Irenaeus stated that John saw his vision ‘not long ago, but almost in our own generation, towards the end of Domitian’s reign’ (Against Heresies 5.30.3), and this opinion was quoted with approval by Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History 3.18–20; 5.8.6). This corresponds quite closely with what can be discerned from the concerns of the book itself, though there is some doubt regarding the extent to which Domitian (AD 81–96) instituted any widespread persecution of Christians. In terms of the demands being made of Christians in relation to emperor worship, Revelation could reflect conditions any time from the reign of Augustus onwards (31 BC–AD 14), though Domitian certainly had a higher opinion of himself than some of his predecessors, insisting on being called ‘lord and god’ (Dominus et Deus), while his coins depict him enthroned as ‘father of the gods’. Emperor-worship in general was especially deeply entrenched in the area of Roman Asia to which Revelation was addressed.

Opinion is evenly divided on the question of date, with many scholars placing Revelation in the reign of Domitian, while others argue that it was written earlier, in the time just after the persecution of Christians by Nero. Reasons for this include the fact that there is no explicit reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and if Revelation 11:1–2 is understood literally it could imply that it was written as the final assault on the temple was underway. There is also the fact that 13:3 mentions one of the heads of the ‘beast’, or antichrist, having been fatally wounded but coming to life again to rule the empire – and there was a widespread expectation that Nero was likely to return in this way. In addition, depending on how the list of seven emperors in 17:9–11 is analysed, it is possible to place the seventh and final one either in the time of Nero or his successor Galba (AD 68–69). Such speculations however assume that John had actual historical figures in mind at this point, whereas in the light of his predilection for the number seven, it is just as likely that these seven emperors were never intended to be real people but were a way of referring to the sum total of all the evil that is opposed to God. On balance, there seems no

compelling reason to reject the traditional date for Revelation of about AD 95.

Justin Martyr identified the John who was the author of Revelation as ‘one of the apostles of Christ’ (Dialogue with Trypho the Jew 91). The idea that he was this particular John seems unlikely, for the writer of Revelation mentions ‘the twelve apostles of the Lamb’ with no suggestion that he might have been one of them (21:14), while the way he introduces himself as ‘your brother… a follower of Jesus… your partner’ (1:9) hardly suggests he was a person of great authority in the church. But he was clearly steeped in the imagery of traditional apocalyptic writings, and we may therefore suppose he was a Jew. At the same time, there are a number of unusual connections between Revelation and the Gospel of John, which it was suggested in chapter 10 had some indeterminate connection with Jesus’ disciple of that name. Both John and Revelation refer to Jesus as ‘the word (logos) of God’ (John 1:1–14; 1 John 1:1–4; Revelation 19:11–16). Both of them also call Jesus ‘the Lamb of God’, though they use different Greek words to do so (John 1:29; Revelation 5:6–14). Furthermore, both the gospel and letters of John seem to have some connection with the city of Ephesus, which was also one of the churches addressed in Revelation. A plausible explanation of this is to connect Revelation with a school of Christian thinkers established and inspired by John the apostle in Ephesus, with different members of this group, including John himself, being responsible for the final form of the various books which are now associated with his name.

CHAPTER 20

HERESY, ORTHODOXY, AND ORGANIZATION

The earliest Christian communities did not stay the same for long. The excitement of being part of a new movement typified by the work of pioneers like Paul soon gave way to a more settled way of life, and that in turn was followed by a more structured form of organization as one generation gave way to another. The missional impetus was never lost but the major emphasis was now on protecting and defining the legacy of the apostolic age. One of the most influential factors in the changing pattern of life in the early church was the emergence of groups that at a later period came to be regarded as heretics by the majority of Christian believers. Looking back, it can seem that the 'heretics' were just those who eventually lost the arguments, while the mainstream consisted of those who won. But it would be a mistake to depict these disputes as little more than power struggles for control of the growing church. There were significant ethical and theological issues involved, whose origins can be traced back to currents of thought previously encountered in discussing the letters of Paul. Paul had already denounced people who were proclaiming 'another gospel' (Galatians 1:6), and some of his opponents in Corinth also had a fundamentally different understanding of the Christian message (2 Corinthians 11:1–4). None of them were heretics in the later sense and Paul certainly never went so far as the second-century church leaders by suggesting that they should be excluded from the church. Rather than representing any sort of organized movement, most of them seem to have been personal opponents of Paul, who sprang up spontaneously in different places. Paul was not entirely successful in dealing with the questions they raised and some of the later New Testament books show how they were beginning to consolidate into distinctive movements within the church. By the middle of the second century Montanists, Gnostics, and others had become clearly identifiable groups. But in the first century the tensions that led to the eventual formation of separate sects were only just beginning to surface in church life, and the tendencies that can be traced towards the end of the first century were much more loosely defined.

Letters to seven churches

While the largest part of the book of Revelation consists of visions depicting the battle between good and evil, its opening chapters reflect the conditions of the seven churches in Asia Minor to which it was addressed. In seven letters, the author presents prophetic messages from the risen Jesus and three of these (to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira) concern the emergence of false teachers (Revelation 2:1–7, 12–17, 18–29). The church at Ephesus is commended because it has 'tested those who say they are apostles but are not, and have found out that they are liars.' In addition, its members are said to 'hate what the Nicolaitans do.' In Pergamum, some church members had actually followed the teaching of these 'Nicolaitans', while others are described as following 'the teaching of Balaam'. The church at Thyatira had also come under the influence of false teaching, in this case from 'that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a messenger of God' – someone whom John says was actually teaching about 'the deep secrets of Satan'.

Such cryptic references provide plenty of scope for speculation over the identity of these various groups, though it is likely that they were all connected somehow rather than being entirely independent of one another. The Nicolaitans appear in both Ephesus and Pergamum, and in the letter to Pergamum the followers of Balaam appear to be the same people. Though neither of these names occurs in reference to Thyatira, the activities of 'Jezebel' there are identical with those of the Nicolaitans/Balaamites in Pergamum: they all eat food offered to idols and indulge in practices that were regarded as immoral. Paul had tackled both these issues at an earlier period, though he never suggested that there was anything like heresy involved in such activities. For him, eating food offered to idols was a matter of indifference to Christian believers (1 Corinthians 8), and though he typically had less patience with instances of bad behaviour, he generally dealt with them in a tactful and generous way, seeking to persuade rather than to dictate. Things must have changed in the interim. In Paul's time, these were mainly practical issues arising naturally as Gentile converts worked out how their new faith might affect their lifestyle. But they had now become theological concerns, and though the book of Revelation gives no real indication of the sort

of beliefs that led to such activities, a number of considerations suggest that these sects were an early form of what was later known as Gnosticism:

Some second-century Gnostics actually called themselves ‘Nicolaitans’. They traced their origins back to Nicolaus, who appears briefly as one of Stephen’s Hellenist colleagues in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5) but is otherwise unknown. It is unlikely that these later individuals had any real connection with this person, though some of their practices were not dissimilar from those mentioned in Revelation.

Though the heretics opposed in Revelation were undoubtedly less sophisticated and less well-organized than these later groups, there are some signs of Gnostic terminology and ideas here. For instance, Jezebel’s teaching in Thyatira is referred to as ‘the deep secrets of Satan’ (Revelation 2:24), an expression found among later Gnostic groups as a description of their own beliefs. The fact that a woman should have been so prominent in this movement is also consistent with some kind of Gnostic connection, for in the Gnostic movements of the second century women often enjoyed a significant and conspicuous role. Indeed, this was one reason why the church after the New Testament period officially excluded women from any form of public service.

The evidence of other New Testament books points in the same direction. The letters of John, as well as Jude and 2 Peter, all originated in the same geographical area as that referred to in Revelation, and they all mention wandering teachers who operated in the same way as those who feature in Revelation. 1 John explains their theology in considerable detail, and we can see from that how close these people were moving towards classical Gnosticism.

1 John

Like the Gospel of John, 1 John spells out its author's intentions quite clearly: 'I am writing this to you so that you may know that you have eternal life – you that believe in the Son of God' (5:13). The gospel was written to demonstrate that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God, and to win people to faith in him (John 20:31). By contrast, 1 John was written to people who were already Christian believers, but who needed to be reassured of the truth of what they believed.

‘False prophets’

It is not difficult to see why these people needed such reassurance. Like the churches mentioned in Revelation, the Christian community to which they belonged was suffering from the activities of ‘false prophets’ (1 John 4:1). These people had originally been members of the community, but they had left and were now trying to subvert it from the outside (2:19). Of course, that was not how the false teachers saw things. They believed themselves to possess special revelations that were not entrusted to more ordinary Christians, and spoke of ‘knowing’ God in an intimate way through some secret spiritual empowerment that enabled them to live on a different plane from the others (2:4; 4:1; 4:8). They were already spiritually ‘perfect’ (1:6, 8, 10), living in full appreciation of the ‘light’ which was God (1:5; 2:9) – and so the normal earth-bound rules of Christian morality no longer applied to them (3:7–12; 4:20). All this sounds remarkably similar to claims made in Corinth, where some believed that because of their mystical experiences they were no longer bound by the normal constraints of embodied existence (1 Corinthians 10:1–13) but had already been raised to a new spiritual level far above that enjoyed by ordinary mortals (1 Corinthians 4:7–8). It was, they said, just as if the resurrection had already come: they might seem to be living in this world, but really they had been totally liberated from it, and so they no longer shared its concerns (1 Corinthians 15:12–19). People with similar views also feature in 2 Timothy 2:17–18. 1 John does not actually say that these ‘false prophets’ also believed that the resurrection had already taken place through their own mystical experiences, but it is likely that they held this view too.

Docetism

There is, however, a new element in 1 John. For the ‘false prophets’ mentioned here had a distinctive understanding of the person and significance of Jesus himself, and it is clear from what is said about them that John’s opponents were questioning Jesus’ identity as Messiah and Son of God (2:22–23; 4:2, 15; 5:1–5, 10–12). It was not that they denied that Jesus had revealed the power of God, but they found it difficult to comprehend how an ordinary human person could reveal the character of eternal divinity. So they asserted that Jesus was not truly human at all (4:1–3).

From Plato (419–347 BC) onwards, Greek thinking had always distinguished this material world from the heavenly, spiritual world. Whereas the Hebrew tradition affirmed that God’s activity could be seen in the affairs of human experience, Greeks more typically regarded life here as a miserable existence and the true destiny of humanity lay not in this world but in some other spiritual world. On this understanding salvation consisted in the escape of an individual’s inner core, or soul, from the prison of this world into the life of that other world. There were many explanations as to how this might be accomplished, but it is obvious that the desire for such liberation was what motivated both Paul’s opponents in Corinth and those whose teaching the author of 1 John was opposing. To start with, the attraction of these ideas lay in their promise of exciting mystical experiences. But once they began to think through the theological implications of this worldview it became more difficult to reconcile that with the traditional belief that Jesus himself – as Jesus of Nazareth, an ordinary mortal – could have come from God. For if divinity was embedded in this other non-material world, how could God also be regarded as a real human person? It would be a contradiction in terms.

One way out of that dilemma was the suggestion that the human Jesus had only seemed to be the Messiah or Son of God. This view is called ‘Docetism’ (from the Greek word dokeō, meaning ‘to seem’), and it is most likely to be something of this sort that is opposed in 1 John. Irenaeus (c. AD 115–202) tells a story of

the apostle John's visit to a public bath-house in Ephesus. When he got there and recognized Cerinthus (a prominent Docetist) he refused to share the same water (Against Heresies 3.3.4). Some have suggested that 1 John was a direct reply to Cerinthus himself. He certainly argued that the 'divine essence', or 'cosmic Christ', entered the human Jesus of Nazareth at his baptism and left him before the crucifixion, and 1 John 5:6 might be interpreted as a direct and specific reply to this: 'Jesus Christ is the one who came with the water of his baptism and the blood of his death. He came not only with the water, but with both the water and the blood.' Cerinthus, however, had many other ideas that feature nowhere at all in 1 John, and overall the problems dealt with in this letter seem to be more straightforward and less sophisticated than the theology of Cerinthus and his followers. Indeed, with the exception of their speculation about the person of Christ, the heretics of 1 John have much more in common with Paul's opponents in Corinth, and it is probably more accurate to regard them as an intermediate stage between the Corinthian heretics and the fully developed Gnostic systems of the second century.

The letter

The author of 1 John clearly had no time for these people, for he denounced their beliefs and opposed their practices in every section of his letter. He realized all too well the strong pressure that they were placing on the members of the community, and he went out of his way to assure them that they, and not the 'false prophets', were the ones who had the truth.

Beyond that, it is not at all easy to define exactly what 1 John is about. It certainly has no linear argument running through it, which has encouraged some to rearrange the letter so its various sections can fit together in what they regard as a more logical and sequential fashion, while others have explained what they believe to be inconsistencies by supposing that the letter went through more than one edition and is therefore the work of different writers. None of these suggestions has found widespread support. The book contains not just the author's response to those who were opposing him, but also his own theological reflections on the situation which he faced. Though it is commonly referred to as an epistle, it is not really a letter at all as it contains neither address nor greetings. It is more like a reflective homily with its themes being explored in a cyclical way, examined from different angles in order to tease out their significance and meaning. It functions like a piece of music in which the main theme is first expounded, and then is taken up and developed and elaborated as the composer moves on to other themes and ideas yet always returning to the first thought.

Whatever the form of the argument, the message of 1 John is clear enough. Like every other New Testament writer, John was convinced that mystical experiences, however elevated, would only have meaning if they could be integrated with Christian belief, on the one hand, and expressed in appropriate lifestyles and behaviour on the other. It would be of no value talking about being liberated into the world of light, unless God's light truly informed and inspired behaviour, and the idea that mystical experiences in and of themselves can release people into a new way of being is dismissed as unrealistic unless such

experiences are grounded in the reality of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit (1 John 1). True Christians will 'live just as Jesus Christ did', but they must also face up to the reality of their moral poverty, and accept the forgiveness that only Jesus can give (2:1–6). Living like Jesus is a practical affair: it is a matter of loving other people, and this in turn means that anyone who despises others (as, apparently, did the Docetists) can hardly claim to be doing God's will (2:7–15). In reality, they are just indulging their own selfishness (2:16–17). These people may have abandoned the church in order to pursue their own spiritual path, but those who remain should not be intimidated by that, for whatever the sectarians may claim, those left in the church are the true recipients of the Holy Spirit, and they are the ones who have been accepted by God (2:18–29). Not that they have done anything to deserve that love, but having now been adopted as God's children, they should ensure that they continue to do God's will (3:1–10). Taking their example from Christ's love for them, they must love one another (3:11–18), and then they can be sure that they are truly living in harmony with the Holy Spirit, and in personal union with God (3:19–24).

The author keeps returning to the theme that distinguishing the true from the false is not just a matter of human judgment. On the contrary, there is a test of belief that can distinguish false prophets from true believers: 'Anyone who acknowledges that Jesus Christ came as a human being has the Spirit who comes from God. But anyone who denies this about Jesus does not have the Spirit from God' (4:1–6). Since God's own being is love, anyone who is truly filled with the divine Spirit will be the same (4:7–21). The Spirit empowers believers to live in accordance with the divine will and to overcome all that is opposed to God's ways of doing things (5:1–5). With this assurance, true Christians can be certain that they will know and understand God in a way that the Docetists never could (5:6–21).

John and his epistles

1 John is closely related to 2 and 3 John, and though these other two are quite a different type of literature it is clear that they all belong together, and that they also have connections to the Gospel of John. Unlike 1 John, 2 and 3 John are real letters, one addressed to a church and the other to an individual called Gaius. Their author calls himself ‘the Elder’, and in 2 John warns his readers against those ‘who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ (2 John 7–11). That sounds very similar to the arguments dealt with in 1 John, and on that basis some argue that 2 John may have been written first as here they are still part of the community whereas in 1 John the heretics had already left (1 John 2:19). However, a more literal translation of 2 John 7 would have these sectarians denying ‘Jesus Christ coming in flesh’, which could either imply a belief that, whatever the parousia might be, it would not involve a physical presence of Christ – or more likely that, whatever the truth about the physical life of Jesus, it was of little importance: his crucifixion and resurrection, not his life and teaching in Galilee, was what really mattered. 3 John advises Gaius about a man by the name of Diotrephes, who was engaged in a power struggle for control of the church, in relation to which ‘the Elder’ says that he intends to pay a short visit to correct ‘the terrible things he says about us and the lies he tells’ (3 John 9–10).

The situation envisaged in 3 John seems to reflect a stage when new patterns of church government were emerging. As the apostles and their representatives died, the model of shared leadership that characterized the earliest churches disappeared with them, and new leaders jostled for position in a process that eventually led to the recognition of only one authoritative leader in each local congregation. If ‘the Elder’ represented the older form of church organization, that could explain his concern about the emergence of just one person claiming to be the church’s leader. In the second century, anyone with the title of ‘Elder’ would have been a part of the organized hierarchy of the church, though the writer of these letters clearly does not occupy such a position. He was obviously highly respected by his readers, but does not appear to have had absolute

authority over them as he is unable to insist they do as he proposes and can only appeal to them to do what he believed to be right.

The majority of scholars believe that ‘the Elder’ who wrote 2 and 3 John also wrote 1 John, for there are many connections between the three letters in vocabulary and style, and certain statements in 2 and 3 John seem to presuppose some knowledge of the issues dealt with in the first letter. But who was this ‘Elder’? Eusebius quotes a statement said to have been made by Papias (early second century) in his Interpretation of the Oracles of the Lord: ‘If ever anyone came who had followed the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying.’ Eusebius commented: ‘It is here worth noting that he twice counts the name of John, and reckons the first John with… the other Apostles… but places the second with the others outside the number of the apostles.… This confirms the truth of the story of those who have said that there were two of the same name in Asia, and that there are two tombs at Ephesus both still called John’s’ (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.39.4–6).

If the ‘elder John’ to whom Eusebius refers was the same person as ‘the Elder’ who wrote 2 and 3 John, then presumably this second-generation Christian was also the author of 1 John (and perhaps had some connection with the writing of the Gospel of John). But Papias’s statement is itself too ambiguous to provide much guidance, for he also appears to describe the disciples as ‘elders’, and Eusebius may therefore have been wrong to infer that Papias was actually referring to two different people called John. In addition, this whole argument assumes that Papias had access to reliable information. Statements like this should be treated with caution, not least because Papias himself is only known through quotations preserved by other writers. In relation to the Johannine writings, the documents themselves offer more reliable insights into their origin and authorship.

There is an ongoing debate regarding the relationship between these epistles and

the Gospel of John. 1 John and the gospel share many common characteristics, with the same language being used in the same way. Moreover, they both use distinctive expressions such as the contrasts between light and darkness, life and death, truth and error, and the emphasis on love, while the prologue of the gospel (1:1–18) has many echoes in the opening paragraph of the epistle, not least of which is the description of Jesus as the divine Word or Logos (1:1–4). Both also use the same techniques for conveying their message, initially stating an idea in a simple and easily remembered way and then examining its implications from a number of different angles. But there are also some differences. 1 John has a more limited vocabulary than the gospel and its emphasis is also slightly different at some points. For instance, while the gospel lays most emphasis on the present experience of the Christian (‘eternal life’ is something immediately accessible), the letter has more emphasis on the future hope. The letter also has more specific teaching on the church and its sacraments. It has been proposed that the gospel was edited by the writer of the letter, to bring it into line with his own thinking on these points. There is certainly some evidence that the gospel contains the work of more than one person, but it is unlikely that the original form of the gospel has been revised by someone who found it theologically unacceptable. An attractive explanation of the complex connections between the various books connected with the name of John is to be found in the suggestion that there was in Ephesus a ‘school’ of Christian thinking associated with and growing out of the work of John, the disciple of Jesus. On this understanding, he served as the theological mentor of a whole group of Christians and was the source of the information contained in the fourth gospel (see John 21:24), but the literature as we know it now was the product of this ‘school’ rather than of just one individual.

Some scholars dispute the idea that the gospels were written to address the concerns of specific communities, and argue that all four were intended to be read throughout the early church. Even supposing that to be the case, though, they must all have been written by some individual or group in a specific cultural context. In dealing with John’s Gospel it was suggested that its first edition may have been written in Palestine and then perhaps expanded and reissued from the school in Ephesus. In a Jewish context, the contrasts between darkness and light, truth and error, life and death were all ethical contrasts, whereas the same terms had always been used by Greek thinkers to describe the cosmological distinction between the divine world of spirit and the evil world of matter. It is not difficult

to think that readers steeped in this Greek outlook might have misunderstood the gospel's message in a way similar to what was later known as Docetism. This could then be the point at which 'the Elder' (presumably a prominent member of the Johannine school, if not John himself) wrote 2 John to warn against such false teaching. Subsequently, however, things went from bad to worse, the false teachers broke away from the church to form their own sect and 1 John was then written as a more theologically reflective response to the problem. Not only was the Docetic view of Jesus challenged, but it was now emphasized that the resurrection hope was very much something tangible and future, and not just a part of the present spiritual experience of Christians.

If anything like this reconstruction is correct, the date of these letters will depend on the date assigned to the gospel. The teaching opposed in 1 John is certainly more developed than that encountered by Paul in Corinth. There is a clear concept of 'heresy' in 1 John, but it is not as wide-ranging as in the second century. A date towards the end of the first century is perhaps the nearest guess we can make.

Jude and 2 Peter

The influence of false teachers also features in two of the most obscure books of the New Testament: Jude and 2 Peter. These books are widely believed to belong together, for almost the whole of Jude (in a slightly modified form) is contained in 2 Peter. But otherwise, neither book contains anything sufficiently specific to identify their original readers with certainty.

Context

The way these books oppose false teachers suggests that they originated in a situation quite similar to that dealt with in the opening chapters of Revelation. The term ‘gnosis’ (knowledge) is not actually mentioned, but these teachers are described in Jude 19 as ‘psychics’ (‘controlled by their natural desires’), and this certainly was a technical term used by later Gnostics. Such individuals laid great emphasis on their own spiritual experience (Jude 8) and they argued that because they themselves had been ‘raised’ to a new level of spiritual life they had also been released from the normal constraints of Christian morality (Jude 12–13, 16, 18, 23). But all this was unacceptable to those in the mainstream of the church. Jude reminds them that even in Old Testament times people had suffered divine punishment for similar wrongdoing, and unless his readers were prepared to repent they could expect to share the same fate (Jude 8–16).

2 Peter also suggests that these people were denying the reality of the future coming of Jesus (3:1–18). No doubt they argued that since they themselves had already been spiritually ‘raised’ to heaven, there would be no further need for the kind of literal resurrection hope held by the majority of the early Christians. In any case, they said, nothing had happened, even though the church had fervently expected Jesus to return in glory. This argument had been put forward by Paul’s opponents in Corinth, but 2 Peter 3:8 introduces a new answer to it by asserting that God’s timescale is not the same as a human calendar because ‘with the Lord one day is like a thousand years’ (NRSV). The fact that the end has not yet arrived does not mean that God’s promises have failed to be fulfilled. On the contrary, the delay in the coming of Jesus is itself to be seen as an expression of God’s patience in allowing people more time to change their ways.

Jude does not describe the beliefs of these heretics so precisely. He simply asserts that they ‘reject Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord’ (Jude 4). It seems likely that these false teachers had not gone quite as far as those who were opposed in 1 John. They had not challenged the church’s beliefs on a theological level, by declaring that Jesus was not the Son of God come as a human person,

but instead (like the heretics mentioned in Revelation 2:14) they had ‘given themselves over to the error that Balaam committed’ (Jude 11; Numbers 22:1–35), something that was more of an ethical issue than a theological argument.

Authors and dates

Neither Jude nor 2 Peter contains any information at all that might link them to specific events or people in the early church. The only way their background can be understood is by trying to fit them into what is known about the development of the early churches in general. In relation to Jude, opinion is widely divided though the majority of scholars believe it to be a relatively late book and that Jude and 2 Peter belong together at the end of the New Testament period. Reasons for this include the following:

Unlike Paul (and 1 John), Jude does not set out to argue with his opponents. He simply denounces them, and asserts that the answer to their problems is a return to 'the faith which once and for all God has given' (Jude 3). Reference to 'the faith' as if it was a body of information rather than a matter of personal commitment is characteristic of the emergence of institutional Christianity at the end of the first century.

Jude 17 seems to indicate a date later than the age of the apostles, referring to 'what you were told in the past by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.' That could conceivably refer to some occasion when the readers had actually met the apostles themselves, but the same cannot be said of the reference to Paul in 2 Peter 3:14–16 where his letters are mentioned as a recognized and well-known collection of writings, and are also classified as 'scripture'. Paul's letters were probably not gathered together in a collection until after his death, and it is reasonably certain that it would take longer again for them to be regarded as 'scripture' in any authoritative sense.

These facts are often taken to indicate that both books must be dated sometime in the second century, even perhaps as late as AD 150, though there are difficulties about quite such a late date:

It seems likely that 2 Peter was used (along with other New Testament books) by the unknown author of a work called The Apocalypse of Peter which is commonly dated sometime between AD 100 and 135, and so 2 Peter can hardly be later than that.

There is also the fact that the description of the false teachers in Jude and 2 Peter is quite different from any known second-century heresy. There is no hint even of a Docetic view of Jesus, let alone of the more complex theories of the classical Gnostic systems.

There is also no trace of much of the apparatus of the second-century church. There is a consciousness of a fixed body of Christian doctrine, but no indication of an organized ministry in the church. Both Jude and 2 Peter appeal to their readers on an ethical basis rather than on the basis of their authors holding any position of authority.

A minority of scholars therefore have tried to explain the origin of these books by understanding them in the context of a much earlier age. Certainly they both seem to be claiming to be the work of people who flourished in the time of the apostles themselves. ‘Jude, servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James’ (Jude 1) is a description that invites readers to imagine it must be the same Jude who is named in the gospels as a brother of Jesus and of James in Mark 6:3, while ‘Simon Peter’ is clearly intended to identify the author of 2 Peter as the apostle himself (2 Peter 1:1). Since the two books clearly relate to each other, arguments for one inevitably impinge on the other. Evidence said to favour an early date for Jude includes the following:

It is claimed that instead of focusing on the nature of the opponents here, more

attention should be given to those passages which identify the original readers, especially verses 3 and 20–23, which suggest that the letter was not so much written to oppose ‘heretics’ but to encourage the readers to remain faithful to their original calling.

One of the curiosities about Jude is the way that it refers to extra-canonical writings as if they were fully authoritative, especially 1 Enoch, which is explicitly quoted in Jude 14 and alluded to elsewhere. Jude’s reference to how ‘the archangel Michael contended with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses’ (9, NRSV) also looks like an allusion to the Testament of Moses. Such references are said to reflect a period early in the first century, before there was any fixed understanding of which Jewish books the Christians should recognize as authoritative scripture.

Along with this, attention is drawn to the way Jesus is described, especially the use of the title ‘Master’ (Jude 4), which not only reflects the way he is referred to throughout the gospels but also seems not to have been used again as a title for Jesus until the end of the second century.

Arguments like this have been used to suggest that Jude was not only written early in the first century, but also emanated from circles connected with the family of Jesus perhaps in Galilee itself. Even if that were the case, it would not settle the matter of 2 Peter and in any event some other considerations also point to a later date:

The early church had some doubts about both these books. Jude is mentioned occasionally by early Christian writers, but 2 Peter is mentioned nowhere before the works of Origen (AD 185–254), and as late as the fourth century both of them were regarded either as spurious or of doubtful value. This at the very least must suggest that they were not generally believed to be written by leaders of the first generation of Christians.

Coupled with this, there is general agreement among scholars of all opinions that if 1 Peter is the work of Peter, the disciple of Jesus, then 2 Peter as it stands is not. Many writers in the early church were perplexed by the differences between the two, for in style of writing, theological emphasis, and general outlook they are so different that it is impossible to think the same person wrote them both. If we were correct to argue that 1 Peter is indeed connected with Peter himself, then we must look elsewhere for an explanation of 2 Peter.

One possible solution might be indicated by the statement of Jude 3, where the writer reports that he was in the process of writing a letter to his readers, when he became aware of a more urgent need to communicate with them immediately, in response to which he wrote the letter of Jude itself. Could that original letter he was busy writing have been 2 Peter, and further, could it be that the earlier letter referred to in 2 Peter 3:1 was not 1 Peter, as has generally been supposed, but Jude? Nothing at all is known of the Jude who was brother of James and of Jesus, so any connection with him is pure speculation. A more likely scenario is to regard Jude and 2 Peter as products of a group of Peter's disciples, in much the same way as the Johannine letters appear to have originated from a 'school' of John's disciples. This could account for both the similarities and the differences between 1 and 2 Peter. It could also explain why certain sections of 2 Peter (like the description of the transfiguration of Jesus in 1:16–18) have struck many readers as authentic reminiscences of Peter himself. Perhaps what we have in both these short letters is a fresh application of the teaching of Peter to the concerns and interests of a Hellenistic Jewish Christian congregation somewhere in Asia Minor towards the end of the first century.

The Spirit and the letter

The rise of alternative understandings of Christian belief had far-reaching consequences that went well beyond the immediate issues about which there were disagreements. By the early years of the second century radical shifts were taking place that transformed the shape of church life from the loosely structured communities of Paul's day into a formal structure that has dominated understandings of the church right up to our own day.

Paul's charismatic model of Christian community was not unique to him and the earliest church in Jerusalem had a very similar self-understanding. These early followers of Jesus were inspired by their experience of the Holy Spirit and at the very beginning they gave little thought to organizing the infant church. It never occurred to them to appoint officials or write a constitution, nor did they find it necessary to establish an army of bureaucrats to direct their worldwide mission from some central headquarters. They believed they already had the only organizing force they needed, in the guidance of the Spirit. The Spirit told them what to say in their preaching and empowered them in saying it (Acts 4:8, 31; 5:32). When Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the church Peter had no doubt that this was a direct challenge not to himself, but to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:9). For the church did not belong to the apostles: it had come into being through the generous work of the Spirit and its members were ultimately responsible to God. The same emphasis can be found elsewhere in Acts. When the church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas off as missionaries it was acting on the instructions of the Holy Spirit, who spoke directly to the congregation through certain Spirit-filled individuals within it (Acts 13:1–3). This sense of dependence on the Spirit's guidance is perhaps the main characteristic of Paul's work, both in the stories of Acts and in his own writings. Indeed, the emphasis is so strong in Acts that some readers of the New Testament have preferred to regard it not so much as the 'Acts of the Apostles' as the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'.

This way of doing things is quite foreign to modern Western culture, though it is

not very different from what has happened in recent decades in the growth of indigenous Christian churches in other parts of the world. This difference of approach underlines a fundamental distinction that must be drawn between the life of the earliest church and the way in which the Christian church subsequently developed within the European cultural context. For at the beginning nobody ever sat down and planned to start the church. When Jesus died on the cross his disciples were for the most part disillusioned and perplexed. This was not what they had expected, and even after the resurrection they were still apprehensive (Luke 24:13–24). The church was not the brain-child of the disciples: it was the work of God. On the Day of Pentecost, God spoke to its founder members and worked among them in such power that they had no option but to respond. Into the deadness of their own frustration, the Spirit breathed the life of God, and as individual disciples experienced the compelling power of the Holy Spirit for themselves they were drawn together in a community of love and friendship – love for God, love for one another, and love for the rest of the world. Their educational, social, economic, and political backgrounds were quite diverse, and the only thing they had in common was the fact that through the Spirit, God had changed their lives.

They were bound together as a group not by the fact that they all belonged to the same organization but because they were all inspired by the same Spirit. It is at this point that we can locate the distinctive self-understanding of the early church. Unlike later generations of Christians, they never saw themselves as any kind of bureaucratic organization – indeed, they did not understand themselves as any sort of organization, but preferred to describe their communities as a living organism. Paul expressed this idea most explicitly with his use of the terminology of ‘the body of Christ’ (Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31). For him, what united Christians was not the fact that they were all part of the same club but the reality that each and every one of them shared in the life and power of Jesus himself through the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The Spirit was the organizing principle of the church’s life, and because of that it was unnecessary for the believers to organize the church themselves. Jesus had implied something along the same lines in using the imagery of a living plant to describe the relationship between himself and his disciples, with the same source of life filling and energizing all its parts (John 15:1–10).

We have already seen how this understanding of Christian fellowship became central for Paul, and there is no reason to doubt that it was the view of other apostles, including Peter. The authentic picture of a church in the New Testament is of groups of Christians acting together in a spirit of mutual love and friendship. When Paul wrote to the church at Rome some twenty years after the events of Pentecost, there seems to have been no organized hierarchy and the final chapter of Romans shows multiple groups of Christians meeting together in the homes of different individuals in an essentially informal way. Paul mentions several people known to him, together with the names of the people in whose homes these groups met (Romans 16:3–15), but there is no suggestion that any of them had any sort of official position among the Christians. Instead, they are all ‘Christian brothers and sisters’ as the followers of Jesus had always been, not only from the Day of Pentecost but as far back as the days of Jesus’ own ministry (Mark 3:33–35).

From spontaneity to authority

Within the space of about forty years, all this had changed quite dramatically. The next significant piece of evidence from the church at Rome is the early Christian document called 1 Clement. This was a letter sent from Rome to Corinth in about AD 95, and it is especially interesting for New Testament study because it provides some insight into what was going on at that time in two churches that are well-documented in the New Testament. The church in Corinth had not changed much at all and was still being torn apart by similar controversies to those faced by Paul. But the church at Rome used a new argument to try to put things right. It suggested that certain of its leaders had special authority which was vested in them by their position as accredited officials in a church hierarchy:

The apostles have received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God.… The apostles appointed the first-fruits of their labours to be bishops and deacons for those who would believe. Nor was this a new fashion, for indeed it had been written concerning bishops and deacons from very ancient times…

1 Clement 42

It seems that by AD 95 these local ‘bishops and deacons’ in the Roman church were regarded as the successors of the apostles, and not just metaphorically but quite literally, for they had the confidence to try and exercise the supreme authority of the apostles, even over the church in the Greek city of Corinth. This impression is reinforced when we notice that an earlier chapter of 1 Clement differentiates between two groups of people within the Christian community. No longer are all members regarded as equals, but instead they are divided into clergy and laity. Indeed, there even seem to be two groups of clergy (both of

them male): ‘His own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations devolve on the Levites. But the lay people are bound by the lay person’s ordinances’ (1 Clement 40). Of course, 1 Clement can only tell us how things were moving in the church at Rome. There is no guarantee that the church in Corinth actually accepted all this when it received the letter, still less that it was itself organized in the same way. But other Christian literature from the same period also documents a significant shift in the church’s self-understanding. There was still a degree of admiration for the idea that the church could and should be led by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but Christians were coming more and more to feel that the church must be organized along institutional lines.

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria at the beginning of the second century, also had something to say on this subject. During his last journey to Rome to face execution, he wrote seven letters to various churches. One of the subjects that he discussed was the relationship between a church and its leaders and it is clear that, in his view at least, the leaders of the church had a particular authority that distinguished them from ordinary church members. Three distinct types of clergy are identified in his writings: the elders or presbyters, the deacons, and over them both, the bishop. The word ‘presbyter’ has given us the modern word ‘priest’ though at that stage there was no thought of priests who might offer sacrifice on behalf of the people in the Old Testament sense. Both bishop and elders should be given great respect, for a person’s attitude to them was regarded as a reflection of their attitude to God (Ignatius, To the Magnesians 3). Indeed, in one letter Ignatius declared that anyone who agreed with the bishop was a friend of God, while those who disagreed with him were God’s enemies: ‘… as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ, they are also with the bishop… but if anyone follows another who creates a division, they shall not inherit the kingdom of God’ (Ignatius, To the Philadelphians 3).

In assessing the significance of this, it is important to remember that Ignatius was speaking for himself and it is hard to know how widely his opinions would be shared by others at the time. He went to such lengths to defend the status of these religious offices that it is a fair guess that their significance must have been in some dispute. Nevertheless, it was not long before Christians throughout the

world came to accept that this was what the church should be. Instead of the community of the Spirit to which the early New Testament narratives and letters bear witness, the church came to be defined in organizational terms. Instead of a conscious reliance on the Spirit's direct guidance it was controlled by a hierarchy of ordained men (never women), following strict rules and regulations covering every conceivable aspect of belief and behaviour. When the Spirit featured in this scheme, it was taken for granted that what the leaders decided was what the Spirit was saying.

By the middle of the second century, the change was complete. At the beginning, the only qualification for membership of the church had been a life changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, at the very start there had been no real concept of 'church membership' at all, and on the Day of Pentecost all believers in Jesus were automatically members of the church. There was no need for them to apply to get in, nor could they have opted out, even had they wished to do so. But by the end of the first century things were rather different. Now the key to membership of the church was not to be found in inspiration by the Spirit but in acceptance of ecclesiastical dogma and discipline. To ensure that all new members had a good grasp of what that meant, baptism itself was no longer the spontaneous expression of faith in Jesus it had originally been (Acts 2:40–42) but the culmination of a more or less extended period of formal teaching and instruction about the meaning of Christian faith (Didache 7). In all this, we can see how the charismatic notion of life in the Spirit was being gradually squeezed out of the body of Christ, to be replaced as the church's driving force by the more predictable, if less exciting, movement of organized ecclesiastical machinery.

Institutional influences

It is easy for modern readers to dismiss the last 2,000 years as a perversion of the original vision. The truth is much less melodramatic, and is an illustration of the sociological reality that any new movement founded by a dynamic leader will invariably become yet another settled institution in its second generation – indeed, that it needs such structure if it is not to implode on itself.

This insight can be traced to the pioneering insights of Max Weber (1864–1920) who proposed that any group started by an inspiring leader will inevitably change after the leader is dead. As the second-generation followers try to adapt the original spontaneous lifestyle to the normal concerns of everyday life, the structures they create will inevitably become more institutionalized. Weber identified several reasons for this, economic interests being the most significant as the original leader's close associates subsequently become his or her official representatives. They therefore have a vested interest in developing an organization and setting themselves up as a privileged hierarchy with the main job of other members of the movement being to support them financially and through their obedience. In the course of this process, the dynamic inspiration of the original leader is lost and the charisma is changed into a more tangible quality that can be handed on from one holder of an office to another. It is possible to find early traces of this process in the New Testament itself. For example, in 1 Timothy 4:14 the reception of spiritual gifts is identified with the act of appointment to an office, something that has been widely believed in the church ever since. The odd thing is that it should have taken so long for this new development to happen. The early church became fully institutionalized not in the first generation after Jesus, but in the second and third generations.

Up to that point, the experience of the church runs contrary to the expectations of Weber's theory. Though Jesus was undoubtedly what he would have called a charismatic leader, the institutionalization of the church was not a simple linear development. In fact there seem to have been elements of institutionalism from the very start. The earliest groups regarded the Lord's Supper or Eucharist as an

exclusive community meal, practised baptism of its converts as a rite of initiation, and were conscious of having traditions to hand on to future generations. Its leaders had considerable authority and were, at least on some occasions, paid by other church members. But one conviction above all prevented the church developing into an organization existing for the sole benefit of its leaders, and this was the universally held belief that Jesus was not in fact dead, but alive, and continuing to work among his followers through the power of the Holy Spirit. For as long as the church saw itself as the community founded by the Holy Spirit, this state of affairs could continue. But once it became suspicious of the exercise of charismatic gifts (because of their misuse), the real presence of Jesus became more of a dogma than a living reality and it was a short step from that to the institutionalized church and ultimately to Christendom.

The natural development of institutions was not, however, the only influence that determined the emerging structures of church life. Three other factors played a major role.

Church growth

One of the most impressive features of the early church is the extraordinary speed at which it grew. Beginning from a handful of people in rural Palestine, within twenty years or less it spread through the whole of Europe and beyond. All this was achieved with no real organization at all, and yet the very success of this spontaneous world mission was itself to demand some integrated scheme of operation. At first, no one gave much thought to such things. They already had the only structure they needed. Most, if not all, of those who became Christians on the Day of Pentecost were either Jews or Gentile converts to Judaism, and they simply accepted and continued in the forms of worship that they already knew and loved. The early chapters of Acts describe them meeting regularly with others who believed in Jesus, but that was an extra for they also worshipped in the local synagogues, and even in the temple itself (Acts 2:46). However, it was not long before the need arose for some kind of organization, however primitive. Stephen first came to prominence as a leader among the Hellenist Christians of Jerusalem because they felt they were not getting a fair share in the distribution of church funds (Acts 6:1–6). The nature of their complaint implies that the Hebrew Christians were not suffering the same disadvantage, and the fact that the response to the complaint was the establishment of a group of seven to supervise the distribution of funds to the Hellenists suggests that there was already in existence a similar group dealing with the needs of the Hebrew Christians.

We should perhaps not be surprised that these first church ‘officials’ were appointed to deal with such a practical matter, for the only formal office identified in the small group of Jesus’ own disciples was that of treasurer, a function carried out by Judas Iscariot, sometimes with less than complete honesty (John 12:4–6; 13:29). It was not accidental that the very first stirrings of organization within the early church should have been concerned with the same subject, for Jesus himself had taught that after love to God, love to one’s neighbour was the next most important thing (Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27). It was certainly one aspect of his message that the early church took very seriously indeed, for its members even sold their goods and

property and pooled the proceeds. They were determined to be united with other believers not only spiritually, but in other more tangible respects too. They shared one common purse, as well as serving the same Lord (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32, 34–35).

This collaborative use of resources was not to be typical of the church when it spread to other parts of the Roman empire, but the sharing of goods to a greater or lesser degree was always part and parcel of the Christian gospel. We have already noticed the generosity of the church at Antioch (Acts 11:27–30) and the Gentile Christians of Greece and Asia Minor, expressed in the gifts they sent to the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:26). Jesus' emphasis on loving one's neighbour was taken seriously throughout early Christianity. The New Testament is full of exhortations to do just that in many detailed ways, while by the end of the first century the church was also acting as an employment agency to help Christians find jobs (Didache 12). Obviously, as the church grew bigger the demand for such services increased substantially and the co-ordination of aid required more organization than it had at first. Of course, people performing these jobs were not doing the work of the later clergy: they had no control over worship, and their very existence was more a matter of convenience than anything else. Some translations of the New Testament confuse their role by calling them 'deacons', but they were not deacons in any modern sense of the word. They had no authoritative position in the church, but on the contrary were regarded as the church's servants (the real meaning of the Greek word from which 'deacon' is derived).

But were there others who were formally recognized leaders with responsibility for the regulation of worship and belief in the early churches? This is a highly debatable question, though most would agree that using the language of later church order in relation to, for example, Paul's churches is unhelpful, for in effect there was no church order in any technical sense and an individual's usefulness in the church was determined directly by his or her endowment with the Spirit. The whole notion of people being specially appointed to a position of authority was quite foreign to Paul's thinking. Instead, all those who had received the Holy Spirit (and it was impossible to be a Christian without that) were regarded as 'office-bearers' in the church – though, if everyone was an

office-bearer, then in effect no one was! Even the apostles themselves appear to have had no authority just because they were apostles, but only in so far as the Holy Spirit gave it to them. Some have taken this to mean that all forms of authority are to be regarded as a denial of the gospel. But Paul's charismatic understanding of leadership did not lead to a free-for-all in the church and he made it quite clear that a Spirit-directed leadership had its own built-in limitation of the work of any given individual within a church because every Christian was not equipped by the Spirit to perform the same tasks (1 Corinthians 12). This worked well enough among people with the appropriate level of personal maturity and spiritual discernment, though in other circumstances Paul found himself struggling to persuade his readers that if they were prepared to pay attention to the Spirit that would lead to a situation in which things would be done 'decently and in order' (1 Corinthians 14:40, NRSV). In other places Paul makes reference to specific leadership functions within the church (Philippians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:12) though it is unclear how an individual would be appointed to such positions.

When we turn to the church in Jerusalem, we get a slightly different picture. There, James seems to be very much a man in charge of things, though guided and assisted by others ('the apostles and elders' mentioned in Acts 15:6, 22). Later Christian traditions credit him with having been the first 'bishop' of Jerusalem, and though that may well be an overblown description of his authority it seems likely that he owed his position to some sort of hierarchical arrangement. Very little is known of the formal organization of other churches during the New Testament period. Even the church at Rome is something of a mystery. When Paul wrote to it, he mentioned no leaders at all, though his list of house churches tends to imply that its structure was much more like the earliest churches in Jerusalem than the later congregation led by James. Books like 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude mention no leaders at all, while others speak vaguely of 'leaders', 'elders', or 'shepherds' but without explaining their functions (see, for example, Acts 20:17; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1–5). It seems likely that churches in different parts of the empire developed in different ways and at different speeds, and no doubt this applied to their forms of organization just as much as to their theological evolution. Two conclusions can however be stated with confidence with regard to the churches of New Testament times: they all had a very loose and diverse form of organization, and the concept of official priests or ministers was completely unknown.

Heresy and Orthodoxy

The single most important factor that led to the development of a well-organized and disciplined church in the second century was the emergence of arguments about Christian beliefs, which eventually led to the articulation of quite precise definitions of what could, and could not, be acceptable formulations of theology.

The charismatic view found in the early chapters of Acts and in Paul had always been open to abuse. That was clearly a large part of the trouble that Paul had to deal with in Corinth. As long as Christians were truly led by the Spirit, then things could be expected to work smoothly, but the unscrupulous could easily manipulate such a situation for their own ends. It was all too easy for a person's own ideas and personal preferences to be put forward as the Spirit's guidance, and it was correspondingly difficult for others to prove that someone claiming the Spirit's guidance did not actually have it. Paul believed that the Holy Spirit would lead Christians to do only those things that were compatible with the way Jesus himself had lived, thereby producing the 'fruits of the Spirit', especially that supremely Christian virtue, love (Galatians 5:22–26; Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13). But even this was not enough to control the extremists in Corinth. Paul's own position as an apostle was itself called into question, for others were claiming that by the power of the Spirit they were 'super apostles' and their revelations were more spectacular – and therefore more valid and believable – than his (2 Corinthians 11:1–15).

Similar arguments can be traced in the background to the Johannine epistles. Wandering teachers claiming the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were not only scandalizing other Christians by their behaviour, but were also putting forward notions about Jesus that the church and its leaders found unacceptable (1 John 4:1–21). How could Christians deal with such people? In the earlier period the apostles had been the final authority, but as they died the problem became more challenging. Fringe groups like the Gnostics were gaining ever more ground and it soon became clear to those in the mainstream of the church that it was no longer sufficient just to assert that they had the Holy Spirit, for their opponents

were making exactly the same claim. Faced with such problems, the church had no alternative but to begin a radical rethinking of its position. What did it believe? How could it be sure of knowing where to get authoritative guidance? And how could it ensure that the church in the second century would follow the guidelines laid down by Jesus and his apostles at the very beginning? In the search for answers to these questions, the church began to reassess its life in three main areas.

Beliefs The Christians of whom we read in the early chapters of Acts had not been too concerned to set out their beliefs in any systematic way. That is not to say they had no theology: Jesus himself had claimed the title 'Son of Man' and in the early chapters of Acts we find him identified as the 'Servant of God' (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30) as well as 'the Messiah' (2:31, 36; 3:18, 20; 5:42; 8:5). Because of their own experience of the Holy Spirit, they had no hesitation in associating Jesus with God, and giving him the title 'Lord', the personal name of God in the Hebrew scriptures (Acts 2:36; 7:59–60; 1 Corinthians 16:22). Of course, they also knew that Jesus had been a real person who lived in Galilee and died on a Roman cross. But they were not concerned with defining their beliefs about Jesus more precisely, and the kind of theological reflection that later led to dogmas about Jesus' divinity or humanity would at this time have seemed both pointless and unnecessary. However, when other people came along with claims that Jesus had been only partly divine or not really divine at all, the church was faced with a challenge. It was not a new challenge for Paul had already met something of this sort in Corinth, but after his death the problem became more acute with the emergence of a more structured Docetic or Gnostic worldview. The fact that there were people who called themselves followers of Jesus but had different views than the majority about his significance meant that everyone in the church had to do some hard thinking to try and define more precisely what they really believed.

But where could they locate their beliefs? The Gnostics and their associates had their own books, many of them well-known even today (The Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Truth and various others allegedly containing secret

teaching given by Jesus to some of his disciples). Up to this point much of the church's teaching had been passed on by word of mouth. By the end of the first century, most of the New Testament books were already in existence, but virtually all of them had been written for specific situations in particular churches and, with the possible exception of the letters of Paul, none had been gathered together in any sort of permanent collection. Church leaders like Papias might have preferred the spoken word to what they could read in books (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.39) but the majority felt the time had come to decide exactly what they did and did not believe.

Worship At the very beginning the Christians met together every day, and their worship was spontaneous. This seems to have been regarded as the ideal, for when Paul describes how a church meeting should proceed he depicts a Spirit-led participation in worship by many, if not all members of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26–33). No doubt this was the natural way for things to happen at a time when the church generally met in someone's house. But as communities got bigger it was no longer possible for Christians to gather in this informal setting and bigger crowds inevitably require more structure.

Size was not the only issue that led to the development of more formal structures for worship. As a theory, the notion that every believer should be free to lead publicly in worship made good sense, for they were all inspired by the Holy Spirit. But the reality was often rather different, as Paul discovered to his cost in Corinth. At a time when there were significant debates about the nature of Christian faith there was the constant danger that those who were out of harmony with the church's accepted beliefs and outlook would use this freedom to undermine the faith of the community. Because of this it became necessary to ensure that those who led the church's worship could be relied upon to be faithful to the gospel as it had been delivered by Jesus and the apostles. By the end of the first century a fixed form of service was in existence for the celebration of the Eucharist, and other forms of Christian worship were also becoming less open and spontaneous than they had been. Not everyone welcomed this, and even the Didache (itself a handbook of church order) asserts that the ministry of Spirit-inspired speakers should not be curtailed in the

interests of a formal church order. But in the face of growing threats from fringe groups it was inevitable that this would happen eventually, in order to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith.

Authority If the conduct of worship was to be controlled so as to exclude undesirable elements, two groups had to be recognized within the church: those with the authority to conduct its worship, and those without such authority. From a twenty-first century perspective this can seem a heavy-handed control mechanism. But it is important to realize that the movement towards a more authoritarian church hierarchy originated in the struggle against beliefs that the majority found unacceptable. At a time when Gnostics were claiming a special authority because of their alleged endowment with the Spirit, it was important for the mainstream church to have its own clear source of power. The church's leaders could have claimed that they, rather than their opponents, were truly inspired by the Spirit, but something more specific than that was required in practice, and that was located in a connection with the apostles with whom supreme authority had rested during their lifetime. So, it was reckoned, anyone with recognized authority in the church must be the apostles' successors, and as such could trace their office back in a clear line of descent from the very earliest times. They stood in a line of 'apostolic succession'.

Frustrated hope

It has also been argued that the diminution of hope in the future return of Jesus (parousia) also contributed to the institutionalization of the church. The weight given to this consideration will depend on the extent to which any particular interpreter believes that Jesus and his first disciples expected the arrival of God's future kingdom to be imminent and tangible. Jesus had declared that it would soon come with power (Mark 9:1), and after his resurrection the disciples seem to have lived in daily expectation of the return of Jesus himself in glory. When nothing happened, the argument goes, they had to come to terms with the fact that the world was going to continue as it had always been, and in order to cope with that a visible form of church organization was required. Others, of course, have argued that when Jesus spoke of the coming kingdom he was referring to a spiritual experience that his disciples could enjoy in this present life. Different groups in the early church found different parts of this message more attractive than others. The Christians in the Greek city of Thessalonica became so excited about the fact that Jesus was to return that they gave up work in order to concentrate on preparing for it. Paul rebuked them for this, for though he shared their sense of anticipation, he was quite sure that scaremongering and imaginative speculation were not the way Christians should behave (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11). He reminded them in the words of Jesus himself that 'the day of the Lord will come as a thief comes at night' (5:2) and in the meantime Christians should be good citizens, work for their living and encourage and help other people. That is the way they will be ready for the coming of Christ.

Despite Paul's reticence in making pronouncements on such matters, many people still find it possible to believe that he was obsessed with nothing but the supposedly imminent end of the world. In reality, however, Paul and other leaders of the early church reflect in their writings exactly the same tension between present and future as is found in the gospels. They believed that Jesus would return one day, but they were also quite sure that in an important sense, Jesus was already with them in the person of the Holy Spirit. Even in his earliest letters, Paul gave instructions for Christian behaviour in a settled period of

church life. Had he supposed that it was all to come to an abrupt end, such instructions would have been quite unnecessary. He describes the present experience of Christians as ‘eternal life’ (Ephesians 2:1–5; Colossians 2:13), and John uses the same expression. ‘Eternal life’ was not just a life that might go on forever in the future, but just as significantly it was the life of God as it can be experienced by Christians here and now in the present (John 4:23; 17:3).

With this outlook, the non-occurrence of the second coming of Jesus as a literal happening would hardly be a problem. But there is one New Testament writing where it seems to be taken more seriously. This is 2 Peter, where the writer explains the apparently unexpected delay in the coming of Jesus by the observation that ‘there is no difference in the Lord’s sight between one day and a thousand years’ (3:8). But we ought to note that the problem had occurred here because unbelievers had raised it, mocking the church by saying, ‘He promised to come, didn’t he? Where is he?’ (3:4). Perhaps the issue would never have arisen otherwise, though it certainly became more important to Christians at a later period. Eventually the prospect of a future return of Jesus was lost altogether, and theologians were content to think of the church itself as the new society which Jesus had promised. But this was long after the New Testament period, and the disappearance of a future hope was not the cause of the church’s institutionalization, but was one of its results.

Putting the New Testament together

To maintain their faith, Christians had to decide which books contained an authoritative statement of the church's beliefs and it was thinking on this subject that eventually led to the collection of the twenty-seven New Testament books as having supreme authority. This collection is referred to as the 'canon' of the New Testament, after a Greek word meaning 'a measuring stick': the New Testament was to be an accurate measure by which all theological and doctrinal opinions could be tested.

It is easy for modern readers to imagine that somebody in the early church sat down with a pile of books on their desk and decided which ones to include in the New Testament. But it never happened like that, and the authority of these books did not derive from that sort of selection process. In fact it was well into the fourth century before anyone thought to compile an actual list of New Testament books. There were at least four stages in this process:

From the very beginning Christians acknowledged the special authority of the Jewish scriptures, usually read in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) version. The disciples' recollections of the stories and sayings of Jesus were also highly regarded, though it took some time before they were fixed in any way. We can see this from the fact that the New Testament occasionally refers to sayings of Jesus that are not now contained in the gospels (for example, Acts 20:35) as well as the existence of later collections of sayings of Jesus, some of which are almost certainly genuine. The existence of four gospels rather than just one also shows that there was no single and exclusive collection of Jesus' teaching, and John 21:25 mentions many other sayings and deeds of Jesus not included in his gospel, but no doubt known to some of his readers in one form or another. The writings associated with the apostles were also highly regarded, and even though they were all addressed to specific people for particular purposes they

nevertheless contain indications that their authors felt a special authority attached to their words that would be more universally applicable (see, for example, Galatians 1:7–9). By the time 2 Peter was written, Paul's letters at least were regarded very highly, and could be classed as 'scripture' (2 Peter 3:16).

Moving beyond the first century, into the period of the so-called Apostolic Fathers (people like Ignatius, Clement of Rome, and Polycarp), we find a similar situation. These writers clearlyrespected many of the New Testament books, though they did not necessarily describe them as 'scripture', and over and above these books they also valued many other Jewish and Christian writings.

This somewhat fluid state of affairs received a serious challenge from Marcion, who in aboutAD150 left the church at Rome and declared that he had unearthed a new message that was given in secret by Jesus to the disciples. They, however, had not preserved it intact, and so its secret was later entrusted to Paul. To back up his claims Marcion compiled a list of sacred books, which included only one gospel (identical with none of the New Testament gospels, but not too different from Luke), together with ten letters of Paul. At about the same time there was an explosion of other fringe groups, all of which had their own sacred books. In response to this, the leaders of the church began to compile their own lists and towards the end of the second century, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in France, had a primitive 'canon' of New Testament books. He also set a rough test for deciding the relative value of different Christian books, suggesting that those of most value had direct connections with the apostles (Against Heresies3.11.8). This principle, applied by Irenaeus to the gospels, was refined and extended in the years that followed and in the third century the church historian Eusebius listed in hisEcclesiastical History3.25.1–7 three different categories of Christian writings: those that were certainly authoritative (the four gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation); those that were certainly not (Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Didache, Gospel according to the Hebrews); and those whose status was disputed (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John).

Eventually in the fourth century, we find an actual list of authoritative scriptural books, from Athanasius in the eastern section of the church (AD367), and from the Council of Carthage in the western part of the church (AD397), and the books they listed are the twenty-seven books of our New Testament. Of course these books did not gain their authority then, for they had already been widely used and highly regarded for centuries, and the decisions made in the fourth century were simply the formal acknowledgment of a state of affairs that had existed for practical purposes for many years before that.

In the final analysis, the church became an institution not out of conviction but out of practical necessity. It is easy to look back with hindsight and to imagine that the problems created by rapid church growth and emerging theological diversity might have been tackled in some other way that could have been less inhibiting to further development. But there can be no doubt of the sincerity of the second-century church leaders, nor of their genuine regret that because of excess and abuse, the charismatic ideal no longer seemed to be a practical way forward.

CHAPTER 21

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament can be a frustrating book as well as a source of enlightenment. As we have seen, it is not one book at all, but a collection of twenty-seven writings compiled by different people at diverse times and places during the course of the first Christian century. In addition, the books themselves all have their own distinctive characteristics. Some of them, such as the gospels and Acts, contain narrative, while others are letters – either real letters like those written by Paul, or literary epistles like Hebrews with few or no allusions to actual people. Even within individual books, there can be more than one literary style. The gospels, for example, contain parables and stories, as well as the personal reflections of the evangelists on the lasting significance of what they report. Moreover, the question of how the New Testament should be understood is not only concerned with matters related to the different genres to be found in its pages, but also relates to important considerations of ideological perspective and cultural change.

Beginning where we are

This book has been written from a Christian perspective. Though the preceding chapters have considered historical and literary questions related to the compilation of the New Testament, that has been accompanied by an exploration of the message of these books that is motivated by a conviction that this message (or messages) still has relevance for life in the twenty-first century. Within this frame of reference, three underlying assumptions have been important:

For Christians, the New Testament is not just a collection of writings documenting the rise of the Christian church: it is also scripture, that is, it is in some way authoritative for the ongoing life of the Christian community. To a greater or lesser extent, therefore, this assumption implies that as the New Testament is read and understood it will serve in some way as a paradigmatic guideline or model for Christian belief today. If that is one of the purposes for which we read these books, we cannot limit ourselves to exploring them only in their literary and historical context. We must also explore their sociological, cultural, and relational contexts as they relate to the spiritual search of real people in the real world, whether ancient or modern.

This principle leads to another, namely that modern Christians ought to be continuous with their roots and their heritage. To treat the New Testament as scripture means that there should be some demonstrable connection between what the church is today and the message of Jesus and the life of the early church, together with whatever other spiritual streams have fed into those over the centuries. It is this connection with its history that allows today's church to claim with integrity that it is still in some meaningful sense 'Christian'.

The New Testament cannot and should not be separated from its wider spiritual context, as if its authority and meaning were entirely independent of other

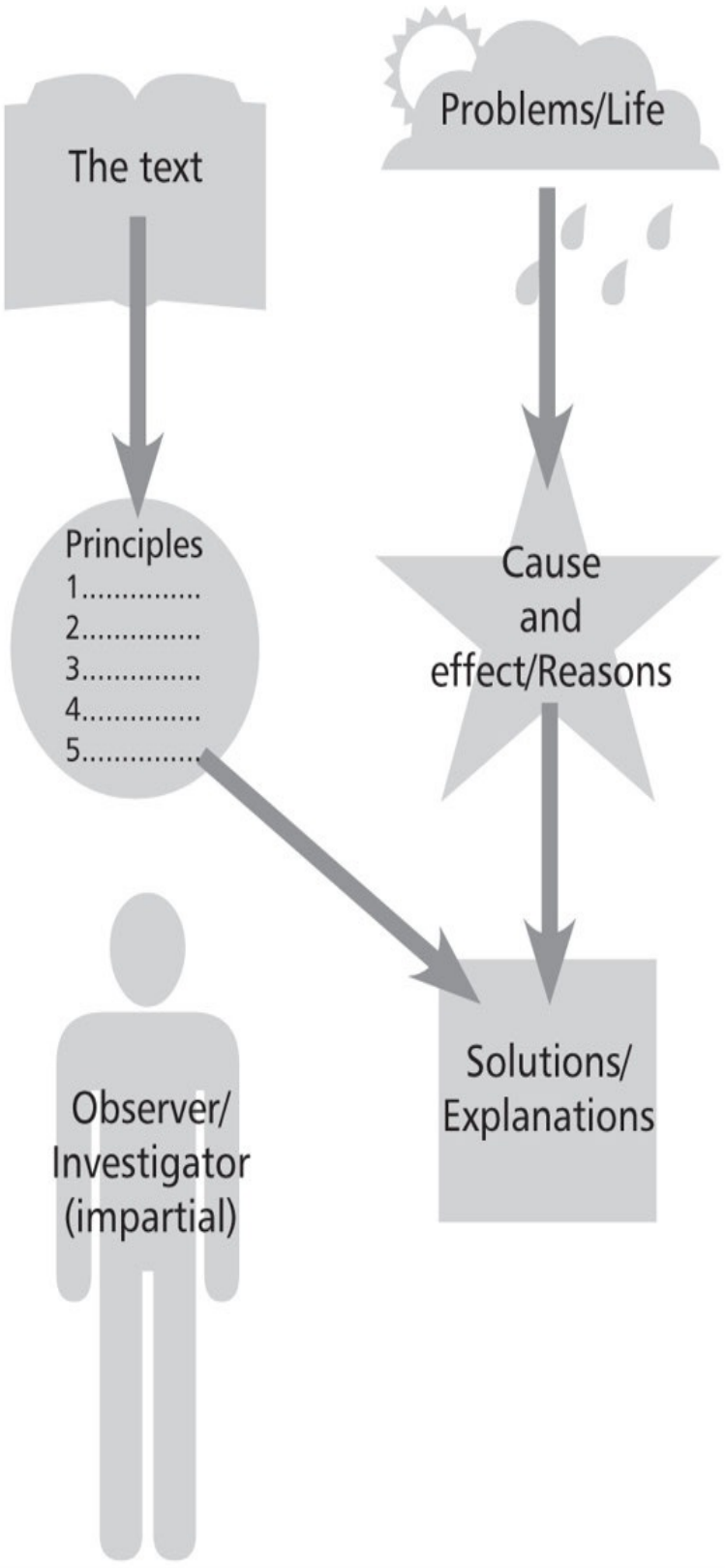
aspects of Christian faith and practice. These books form an important part of the Christian worldview, but they do not stand alone. They are part of a bigger picture, and in the context of Christian belief their message integrates with the recognition that, because this is God's world, God is at work in circumstances and situations that can be far removed from overtly Christian influence, as well as taking account of the spirituality of those who struggle still to follow Jesus. Early theologians often placed 'the book of nature' alongside scripture, to which we might add culture, as that is the prism through which we all discern the other two. To articulate a meaningful expression of Christian faith, the New Testament stories have to be related to a creation-centred spirituality which acknowledges God's universal presence and activity, as well as interacting with the lived experience of actual people.

Starting points

In approaching the New Testament from this standpoint, it is important to be honest about our own presuppositions. There are many ways to read and interpret the New Testament, and Christians have no monopoly on it. Though so-called presuppositionless exegesis has often been flaunted as the only way to understand the text, the whole notion of a totally detached interpreter is deeply flawed. It is neither desirable nor possible to have no initial starting points, and to pretend that 'objectivity' in understanding means starting with no convictions or opinions is pointless and unconvincing. No one can divorce themselves from who they actually are, and who they are becoming, nor is it desirable that we do so. Understanding any text begins with understanding ourselves, and in this context being honest about our prior faith – or lack of it – is going to be central to the enterprise of interpretation. We all have filters built into our ways of thinking and they serve to divert and process information reaching us. The filters consist of things like our inherited values and beliefs about life, our own experience and learning, the store of all those things we have come to regard as true, together with our feelings about those beliefs. The combination of these is what makes each individual's personality unique. Knowing and recognizing our own particular filters – their weaknesses as well as their strengths – is basic to all good interpretation. When scholars deny that they have such presuppositions, they lack credibility, and generally end up reaching untenable conclusions.

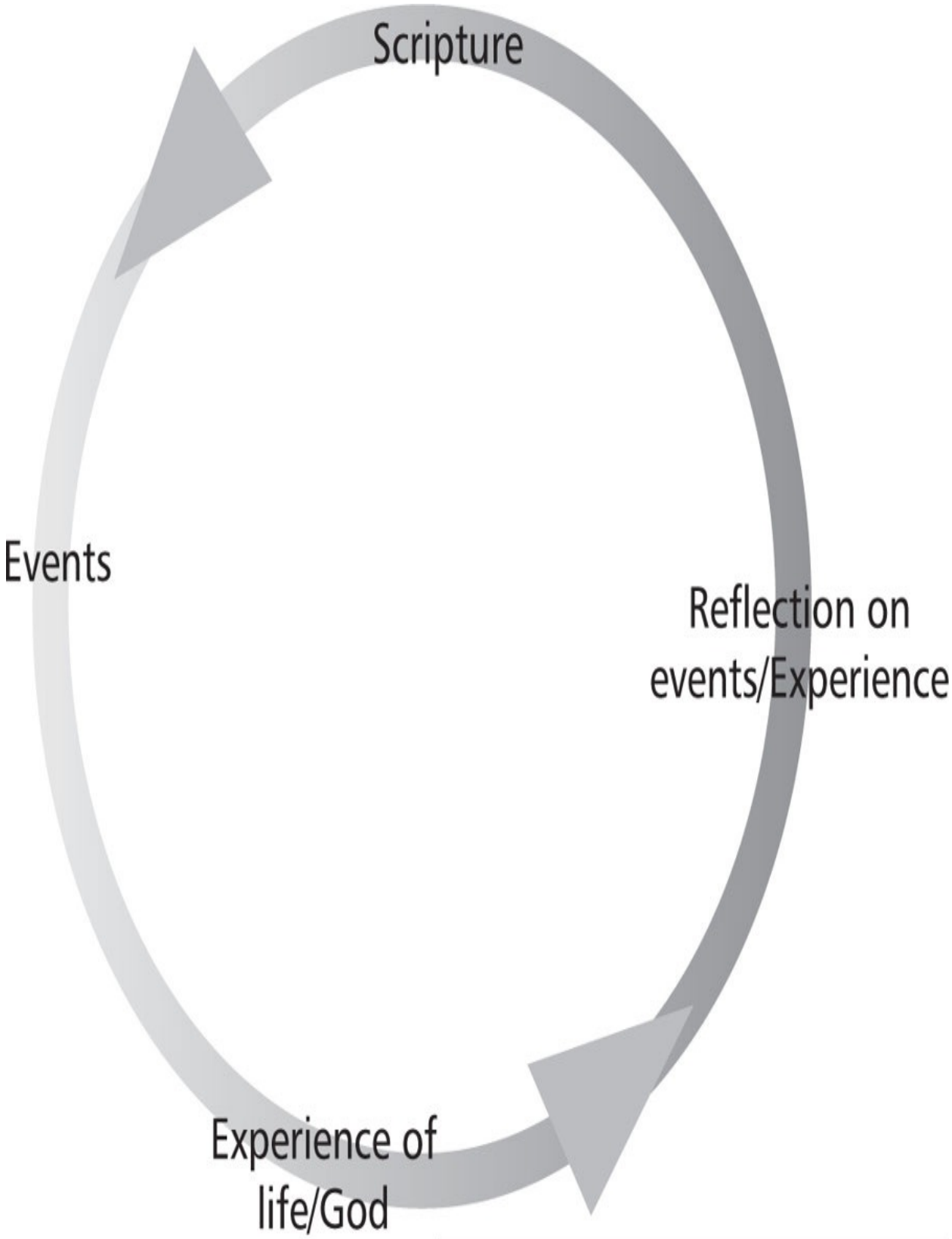
Reading and understanding the New Testament is therefore a two-way process. We bring something to the task (ourselves), just as we anticipate receiving something from it. We speak to these books, and we expect them to speak to us. On this view, interpretation is a dynamic process, not a static one, and it is a holistic process, because it connects with other aspects of the reader's life and experience. This is quite different from the model that Western culture has inherited from the Enlightenment, with its self-confident assumption that objectivity in the sense of total detachment from the text was both possible and desirable. That approach led to a way of looking at the text that (like much within the worldview of recent Western culture) was mechanical and distant from human experience, because it was based on a linear understanding of

reality that allowed the interpreter to think he or she stood completely outside the interpretive process, as the diagram shows.



The historical-critical method encouraged the mistaken idea that it is possible to interpret the text without personally engaging with its message.

This approach has its strengths, not least of which is its ability to highlight the concerns of the ancient world in which the New Testament books originated. But by emphasizing interpretation as a window onto the ancient world, it can make it correspondingly more difficult then to understand how the text can speak to the human condition in a time and place far removed from the first-century Roman empire. A more sustainable method of reading will take account of the contemporary setting right from the outset, and will view the text as a two-way mirror. It will certainly be possible to look through the text and back into its own world, but there will also be a conscious acceptance of the possibility that the reality of our own world can be reflected there, and the encounter of the two can then be used as a starting point for asking new questions of the text which will go beyond only historical matters. This approach owes a good deal to the insights of readers in the developing world, wrestling with the reality of social deprivation and economic challenge and seeking to use those experiences as hermeneutical tools with which to read the New Testament text. A different kind of diagram can illustrate this:



A holistic understanding of the Bible.

Influences

What does ‘objectivity’ mean in this context? A great deal of post-modern philosophy now claims that there is no such thing as objectivity, and therefore there is no point trying to achieve it. Many politicians would agree, and happily embrace ‘alternative facts’ even when they are obviously untrue. It can be difficult at times to distinguish what is true from our own preferences (which can also be prejudices), but that should not be allowed to become an excuse for not making the effort. Maybe the nearest we can come to that sense of standing back from the subject matter of study, and being as detached as possible in order to see what the text is about, is to recognize our own starting points, and then make due allowance for them – perhaps asking tougher questions and being more provocative in the way we deal with the evidence when we find ourselves arriving at conclusions that seem to match our preconceived notions too closely. If that is the case, then we should have some awareness of the sort of personal factors that might be influencing the way we read a text from the New Testament. There are several obvious ones:

Social context has more power than we often realize. As people throughout the Global South have turned to the Bible in ever-increasing numbers, it has become clear how our own cultural context can influence our understanding. People who share in the prosperity of the relatively rich Global North tend to see things differently than economically deprived people elsewhere in the world – or indeed than poor people in Western society. The story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) has a different meaning for westerners (who generally read it and aspire to be like the Samaritan) than for others (who are more likely to identify with the person left for dead by the roadside). Western people are inclined to take it for granted that, if they are anyone in that story, they must be in a position of power and control. Even if they may be hesitant about claiming to be as praiseworthy as the Samaritan, they are more likely to think that they might be like the priest or the Levite than to imagine they could ever be the person who is beaten up. The connection of that with the recent history of imperialism and colonialism is too obvious to require further explanation.

Who we are in terms of gender and age also makes a difference. A man will read the story of Jesus' encounter with a woman caught in the act of adultery (John 7:53–8:11) in a different way than a woman – though both of them might struggle with the way Jesus handled the situation, with many men still thinking that the woman got off too lightly while women might wonder why, in the face of a female in danger of immediate execution, Jesus played games by drawing pictures in the sand. A child would perhaps see something different again – maybe not appreciating what the issue was, but recognizing that by doing something inherently childlike Jesus had rescued the woman from a very sticky situation. Such conditioning has even affected the way in which the New Testament has been translated. In Romans 16:7 Paul describes Andronicus and Junia as his co-workers (perhaps even relatives) and also 'prominent among the apostles' (NRSV). The assumption that only men could have been 'apostles' influenced countless generations of translators to render the second name as 'Junius' or 'Julius' (which would be men's names) – even though the only variant in any ancient manuscript is 'Julia' which, like 'Junia', could only refer to a woman.

Our own state of mind can also affect how we read the New Testament. In previous chapters we have noted more than once how Martin Luther's chronic depression led him to imagine that Paul must have felt the same way, and as a result he portrayed the apostle as a defeated, broken man, oppressed by a narrow-minded Judaism in much the same way as Luther believed himself to have been abused by the medieval church. Those who bring a sense of their own shame to the New Testament can easily exaggerate some of its teaching on wrongdoing, while those who struggle to accept their own emotions will be inclined to play down the sense of human interaction that was found in the early Christian communities, and others may be tempted to emphasize the futuristic aspect of eschatology over against the realized aspect, because they find life in today's world burdensome and challenging.

The same thing can be said about attitudes to the numinous. For generations, the more obviously mystical dimensions of the New Testament have been ignored or

downplayed by Western interpreters. Christians have looked at the prominence of charismatic endowments in the writings of Paul, felt this was not to their taste, and therefore sought for ways to justify their disappearance from the life of the church. Others regularly did the same with the miracles of Jesus, while no one ever quite knew what to make of Paul's inclusion of out-of-body experiences as an authentic aspect of Christian spirituality (2 Corinthians 12:1–10). With a greater awareness of such things from cultures all over the world, and our growing fascination with mystical experience, few people would want to adopt either of those positions today. It is obvious that the scholars of a previous generation were too much influenced by the prevailing rationalism of the day – just as later generations might well identify ways in which our own cultural context now disposes us to see things somewhat differently.

The influence of a rationalist-materialist worldview has been especially powerful during the last two or three centuries. Reality has been understood in such a way that the only things that really mattered were 'facts' as defined in a particular way that could be scientifically verified. In the hands of sceptics this often became a tool that could be used to place a historical or literary question mark against just about anything in the New Testament, as we saw in dealing with the question of the historical Jesus. But in the hands of Christians, this same worldview regularly led to the conclusion that truth is something that can somehow be proved by logic and argument, and therefore by definition any literary analysis of the New Testament that might suggest some of it is in a different genre than narrative history is to be rejected. There have even been those who have insisted that, since on this view fictional material could not be a vehicle for truth, all the heroes of Jesus parables must have been real people who did what is recorded of them in the stories he told.

A major weakness of recent methods of interpretation has been their uncritical acceptance of a reductionist approach to knowledge, which has assumed that things can be understood best by taking them to pieces. This had its origins in the scientific method of people like René Descartes (1596–1650) and Francis Bacon (1561–1626), and the further assumption that the best place for such dismantling to take place is in a laboratory, a space from which all external influences have been excluded. That scientific paradigm has now been discarded

and it is widely recognized that even in a laboratory the presence of the investigator makes a difference to what can happen. But it lives on in much New Testament interpretation, and even Christian believers frequently think it is important to lay aside all religious beliefs or presuppositions in order to unearth what is true. Study of literary texts more broadly (not only religious ones) has demonstrated that reading and understanding is a more holistic business. Since the texts arose out of human experience in the first place, the reader's own experience of life is going to be a key factor in understanding them. That in turn means that readers interact with the text, in much the same way as Bell's theorem describes how scientists interact with the materials with which they experiment. The way a person feels about a text is of fundamental importance, and their own emerging worldview (whether that be Christian or some other) will play a part in the act of interpretation. Faith (or doubt) is not something to be hidden, but to be acknowledged as a significant element in the process of reading and understanding. The idea that a Christian and an atheist could – if both were being totally objective – reach the same conclusions on the meaning of a New Testament passage is nonsense.

The key questions to be asked of any passage in the New Testament are therefore

What is the text saying? That is, what are the actual words, as contained in the most reliable ancient manuscripts?

What is the text's context? That is, questions of historical circumstances and literary style.

What is my context? That is, who am I as a person? What expectations, presuppositions and prejudices am I bringing to it?

What is our context? What is the wider social group within which I belong, and which informs my own perceptions?

The text’s own context

The writers of all these books lived in a very different world than the one we know, and in order to have a full appreciation of the New Testament we need to take account of the specific cultural circumstances in which it originated. In reality, there are several different aspects of the text’s own context that should be considered.

The sociological context

This collection of writings as a whole was brought together as the literary heritage of a religious group, as a testimony to the faith of the early church. While it may be possible to extrapolate historical data from the various books, it is always important to remember that none of them were written to provide such information. Moreover, the church was certainly not in the mainstream of Roman culture, and in some situations found itself forced to operate in a clandestine way. Never fully accepted by the empire, these Christian communities were also struggling to define their identity over against the social context of their origins in Judaism, and therefore the question of identity, and defining the boundaries of the church – both theological and cultural – was a major concern throughout the first century. In addition, the different churches consisted of people drawn from diverse socio-economic circumstances, with relatively poor tenement-dwellers in places like Antioch and well-to-do people with grand villas in cities such as Philippi and Corinth. Some leaders straddled these various spheres of influence. For example, Peter began in the Hellenistic culture of Galilee, then interacted with a different style of Jewish society in Jerusalem and Judea, before involvement with the multi-racial church in Antioch, and then moving on to the great urban centres elsewhere in the Roman world. To understand how these people perceived and experienced God, we need to have some degree of familiarity with an extensive span of historical and cultural circumstances – while recognizing that we are ourselves bringing our own cultural baggage to the enterprise.

Worldview

Greek thinking and Roman technology formed the cultural matrix in which the early Christian communities flourished. But science and technology as it would be understood today was unknown, and the worldview of Hellenistic people was fundamentally unchanged from the assumptions of far more ancient cultures. The cosmology of the time pictured human life as the centre of a three-tier universe: the flat disc of the earth was sandwiched between the murky underworld beneath and the dome of the heavens above, beyond which was a dark and unknowable chaos. This was a magical world, inhabited by so many deities and demons that Petronius (AD 27–66) had one of his characters claim ‘In our neighbourhood there are so many gods that it is easier to meet one than it is to find a man!’ (Satyricon 1.17). Religious observance and everyday life were so closely intertwined that everything had a spiritual aspect to it. In farming communities the sowing of seeds was a spiritual activity, requiring honour to be paid to the gods in an appropriate way so as to ensure the success of the crops. Building a house, going on a journey, forming a relationship – all these things had intrinsically religious dimensions built into them. Though at a philosophical level the prevailing worldview imagined a great separation between the material and the spiritual, in everyday life these two stood alongside each other as just different sides of the same coin. It takes considerable effort for people who live in a more fragmented culture to understand how people in the ancient world might have reflected on and reacted to matters of life, death, and meaning.

Personal perceptions

The expectations of the average person hardly changed from start to finish of the Bible story. The concerns of a peasant economy predominate in the gospels and this naturally determined the sort of imagery used by Jesus in his teaching. The imagery changed as Paul and others took their message into larger centres of population with more familiarity with Greek games and the theatre, but rural ways of thinking still influenced much of the New Testament. Many Christians saw the city as a place of danger: this was where Jesus had been crucified, and where persecution was often at its most violent. Revelation and 1 Peter both identify the city of Rome as 'Babylon' – a city that was symbolic of destructive urban influences as far back as the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, an image perpetuated even today through Bob Marley's song Babylon System. In the New Testament, that is not the end of the story because Revelation 21:9–22:5 depicts the life of the city being redeemed as part of the renewed world of the future, but the idea that a rural life is preferable to an urban one has been surprisingly persistent through much of Christian history. All this was reinforced by the expectations and horizons that were available to most people. Few people were regular travellers – Jesus himself would be typical, for he scarcely moved at all from his home area – and in reflecting on the extensive travels of Paul it is hard to believe that he would not have been familiar with so unsophisticated a mode of transportation as a bicycle. Perhaps as part of this heritage, home and family life was always at the centre of things, and the home was a major focus for spirituality in both the Jewish and the Roman context. Indeed, in the cities of the empire most churches were based in homes and several New Testament passages describe the heads of households deciding that their entire community would convert to Christianity. As well as profoundly influencing the way the Christian communities operated, this feature probably also had an impact on the way that at least some parts of the New Testament evolved. In the context of home-based groups the oral traditions of storytelling would thrive very easily and doubtless this was how many New Testament narratives, especially the gospels, were shaped and handed on in the early years.

Discovering the message

It might seem as if interpreting the New Testament is too daunting a business to be tackled at all by anyone who is not a specialist. In some ways that is true, for there is a certain body of historical knowledge with which we need to be familiar in order to begin to understand these writings fully in their context. That is why this book has laid so much emphasis on the presentation and explanation of such information. But when we think of these books as part of Christian scripture, things start to look more hopeful. Three considerations can help to guide creative reflection on the message of the New Testament writings:

We need to read these books with some sense of empathy with those who wrote them. It is impossible to divorce the New Testament from the processes of thought, experience, faith, and interpretation that produced it in the first place. The writers and their expectations of life and faith, along with their own personal stories, are all an intrinsic part of the mixture. When Christians read the New Testament, they do regard its books in a different way than others might, because they are themselves part of the same community of faith which created them. Many things have changed in the intervening centuries, of course, not least our knowledge of the cosmos. But insofar as they are able to do so, today's readers ought to be open to hearing what the New Testament writers were saying within their own cultural context, while recognizing that all worldview perceptions (including our own) are tentative.

Theologically, the message of the New Testament needs to be set within a larger frame of reference. These writings themselves bear witness to the possibility of God being known in other places, most notably through what later generations have called 'natural theology' or 'creation-centred spirituality'. The narratives of Jesus' birth in Matthew 2:1–12 describe eastern astrologers travelling in search of the Christ child, on the basis of their understanding of the star which led them. In his parables, Jesus uses imagery from the natural world in a way that makes it obvious he regarded the life of plants and animals as capable of displaying

aspects of the nature of God. In chapter 14 we noted Paul's starting points for sharing his faith with others, and his policy of accepting other people's spirituality as pegs on which he might hang the gospel. The story told in Acts 17:16–31, of his mission to Athens, is a classic example, where he had no hesitation in identifying Jesus with the 'unknown god' on the assumption that, if this is God's world, presumably God could be expected to be at work in the most unlikely of places. In Romans 1:18–2:16 he explains the thinking behind this, and places the knowledge of God gained through nature and conscience alongside the Hebrew Bible as equally valid revelations of the divine will. In reading the New Testament, it is a mistake to exclude this bigger picture of God's activity in the world. Ultimately, the New Testament needs to be set in a context of God's work that is much wider and deeper than itself.

The New Testament books cannot be divorced from their human origins. Many efforts to define the inspired and inspirational character of these writings have sought to reduce them to a collection of abstract ideas that can stand alongside other similar propositional notions of truth emanating from the philosophical nostrums of Enlightenment thinking. It is perfectly natural for Christians to want Bible interpretation to be as rational as possible, but in the understandable effort of doing so it is easy to undermine some convictions that are central to Christian faith. Paradoxical though it may seem, weakness and vulnerability are central aspects of the New Testament's message. At the heart of it is the incarnation, with its extraordinary claim that God was best known in this world not through a rich and powerful figure, but through one who came as a child and lived a life of relative obscurity. From the perspective of Western images of power, control, and rationality, this is a very weak message. But if the medium is indeed the message, then we need not be surprised if the Bible also seems to share this quality of strength within weakness. This fluid person-centred aspect of the New Testament is also one of its great strengths. The letters in particular give a first-hand glimpse into the faith, doubt, and struggles of those who created them and those to whom they were addressed. They show real people working through a process of spiritual and personal development, discovering what it might mean to follow Jesus in many different situations. Readers of all generations have been able to make connections with them, for people of faith in all times and places wrestle with the same questions. If the New Testament had been couched in the propositional concepts of philosophical discourse it would have ceased to engage with the human condition long ago, for there will always be a limited number of

people who search for the meaning of life in detached analytical terms. But as a book of stories, the Christian canon speaks as powerfully to people today as it ever did. For the stories of Jesus, together with the experiences of his early followers, provide a bridge across the centuries to the human stories of today, rooted in the underlying conviction that, since this is God’s world, God may be discovered in the most unexpected of places.

The historical-critical method

In dealing with the gospels, reference was made to various interpretive tools that have commonly been used in analyzing their message: source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism among them, together with the sort of historical criticism implied by the long story of the Quest for the Historical Jesus. These methods of study are relatively recent developments and owe their origin and rationale to the philosophical ideas of the European Enlightenment. Beginning with the growing awareness among European people of the existence of other continents and cultures, and continuing through the next four or five centuries with the development of science and technology, Western people managed to convince themselves that their new ways of doing things would deliver the human race from what they came to regard as its previous captivity to ignorance and superstition. Whereas earlier generations had tended to look to religious faith to provide explanations of the meaning of things, now it seemed as if the unaided power of human reason could not only discover new things about the world but would also enable people to live in a different way, reliant only on themselves. In this new world, for the first time in history things would be understood as they actually are rather than as they might be explained by religious teachers who in turn could only justify their opinions by reference to God or some other esoteric source of revelation. As purely rational principles were applied to the study of the human condition, it was only a matter of time before faith itself would be subjected to the same kind of rigorous scrutiny. This was the context in which the Quest for the Historical Jesus had its origins, and the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible was to flourish.

The scientific optimism of the day assumed that everything can be traced back to some relationship of cause-and-effect, and therefore everything can be resolved by the painstaking application of human reason and logic. Bible scholars devised their own version of this process which, it was imagined, would give unhindered access to the early church as it actually was, rather than as later generations of Christians might have imagined it to be. A key part of this process would involve setting the various New Testament books in their original historical and literary context, asking how they were written, why they were written, to whom and by

whom, and for what purpose. Questions like this have featured prominently in most chapters of this book and there can be no doubt that, by comparison with some earlier methods of interpretation, these new questions led to significant advances in understanding. Previous generations had often ignored the historical setting of the New Testament entirely, which left the books open to subjective perceptions of their meaning being imposed on them by interpreters. Now, almost for the first time, there would be some sense of boundaries within which it would be legitimate to operate, boundaries concerned first with the historical setting and secondly with critical (in the sense of detached and analytical) reflection on the meaning of these writings – hence the description of this form of study as the 'historical-critical method'. Great advances in understanding resulted from this process which stressed objective detachment and historical and literary context, and we have not only noted some of them but have taken advantage of them throughout this book. But the historical-critical method was not quite what its exponents claimed it to be. In particular, it was not value-free, but was actually part of a desire within European culture to deny that truth might be discerned from any source other than the human spirit. In the nineteenth century Oxford University professor E. B. Pusey (1800–82) dismissed it as 'a child of disbelief', motivated only by an attitude that would ultimately be destructive of faith. Today's scholars would use more circumspect language, but nobody would wish to argue that the historical-critical method is entirely value-free.

It may seem obvious that an individual's biases will determine not only the way they read texts but also the methods they devise to assist the process of doing so. But it is only relatively recently that this commonsense observation has been acknowledged in scholarly study of the Bible. In the optimistic atmosphere of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries previous generations imagined that they could indeed stand outside of themselves and see things 'as they really are'. That is why the procedures of the historical-critical method were so universally adopted and why it was taken for granted that they could be used to question so many matters that previously had seemed settled. As the twentieth century progressed, it became increasingly obvious that human reason could not solve all mysteries, nor was it necessarily going to make the world a better place. In the twenty-first century rationality itself is being questioned, and the whole nature of New Testament study is far less stable than it once was – so much so that it is difficult to predict where it might go in the future. One thing is certain: that we

should not now make a similar mistake to those who in the past supposed that everything that went before them was to be rejected. No doubt the historical-critical method has many flaws – some of which have repeatedly been spelled out here – but it is important not to lose sight of its benefits. By grounding study of the New Testament in the historical and social context in which it was compiled, great advances have been made and these should not be abandoned just because we can now see that previous scholars were not as dispassionate as they thought they were. What is now required is a recognition of what they got right, an honesty about what they got wrong, and a readiness to acknowledge that the exercise of rationality by itself is unlikely to provide the answer to every human question.

Versions and translations

No original New Testament documents (those written by the authors) now exist and modern translations are all based on copies of copies that date back to the earliest centuries of the Christian era. This can seem like a definite disadvantage to a generation accustomed to instant access to digital information and printed materials – for how can we be sure that what the authors originally wrote has not been tampered with or otherwise distorted in the process of transmission? Questions like this have to be put in perspective, and set in the context of other ancient literature. For example, Julius Caesar wrote in the first century BC and less than a dozen manuscripts of his work now survive – the oldest of which was produced around AD 800–900, almost a thousand years after his time. Tacitus (AD 56–117) wrote in Latin but most of his work is completely lost and our knowledge of what survives is based on only two manuscripts which were copies made in the ninth and eleventh centuries AD. The work of the Greek historian Thucydides (460–400 AD) is contained in fewer than ten ancient manuscripts, the oldest of which dates from about 900 AD. It might therefore be imagined that much of what is reported by these authors would be so distorted as to be useless – yet their accounts are widely regarded as authentic and an indispensable source for understanding Greco-Roman history and culture. By comparison, the New Testament is remarkably well served. There are many manuscripts dating from the period between AD 200 and 300, together with scraps of manuscripts that can be dated even earlier, one of them (the Rylands Papyrus of John's Gospel) originating in about AD 130 which cannot have been more than about fifty years after that gospel was written, and a fragment of Mark's Gospel found on a rubbish tip at Oxyrhnchus in Egypt has been dated to roughly the same period. In addition, there are many quotations from the New Testament included in the writings of early Christian authors from the end of the first century onwards.

Ancient documents

Ancient books were commonly written on three different kinds of material:

Leather documents, made from the skins of animals, were used in Egypt from as early as 2800 BC. According to the Talmud, all copies of the Torah used in public worship were to be written on leather made from the skins of animals designated as ‘clean’, and stitched together into long rolls. There are no known leather New Testament documents.

Papyrus documents were made from the papyrus plant, which grows in the rivers and marshes of Egypt. The pith was cut into strips which were then set out in two layers at right angles to one another so that the fibres were horizontal on one side and vertical on the other. The two layers were then fastened together by pressure and glue so as to make sheets that could be attached side by side to form a long strip and rolled up. The height of the roll was limited to the usual length of the strips of pith, normally about ten inches (25 cm), though a typical roll could be as long as 35 feet (10.6 metres) – big enough to contain the longest of the gospels. At a very early period (certainly by the second century), Christians were using a different form of book, using papyrus sheets folded down the middle and stitched together like a modern book (the codex). Its portability and convenience made a significant contribution to the widespread availability of Christian writings.

Vellum documents were written on animal skins but were different from leather by not being tanned. Traditionally, vellum would be the skin of a calf but skins of other young animals were also used. It proved to be a very durable medium and by the fourth century had replaced papyrus as the material most often used for significant books, including copies of the New Testament. The majority of early copies of the complete New Testament are on vellum, written in what is

called uncial writing. This was a literary style which continued in use until the tenth century AD, when it was replaced by a cursive, or flowing script (technically known as minuscule writing), with smaller letters continuous with one another. This then continued to be used for copies of the Bible until the invention of printing about 1450. The earliest New Testament manuscripts were all written without any punctuation, and often with no spaces at all between words, which creates its own problems of interpretation. Punctuation was added in due course and, though there were earlier divisions into sections, the present division into chapters dates only from the thirteenth century, while sub-division into verses was introduced in the sixteenth century.

New Testament texts

In textual studies of the New Testament, five types of source material are available:

Papyrus documents

Being a vegetable material, papyrus easily decomposed in damp climates and most papyrus documents have therefore come from Egypt where the dry warm sand helped to preserve them. Almost seventy papyrus documents containing parts of the New Testament have been found there, varying from mere scraps like the Rylands Papyrus which contains only five verses of John 18, to the Chester Beatty Papyrus II which has eighty-six nearly perfect leaves of what was originally a codex of 104 pages, probably containing all the letters of Paul. These papyrus documents were written between about the first half of the second century and the fourth century or later. The largest papyrus documents are:

Chester Beatty Papyrus II, containing Paul's letters and dating from the beginning of the third century, more than a century earlier than the date of the major vellum codices.

Chester Beatty Papyrus I, containing portions of the gospels and Acts, of similar date and belonging to the collection of eleven codices of Christian writings dating from the second to the fourth centuries acquired by Sir Alfred Chester Beatty (1875–1968) and now at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

The Bodmer Papyrus has 108 pages which contains (with one missing section) the first fourteen chapters of John's Gospel. It dates from the late second century and is displayed at the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana in Cologny, Switzerland.

Vellum codices

More than 250 of these are known, with the following being the most important of them:

Codex Sinaiticus, which is always designated by the Hebrew letter aleph (א). This dates from the middle of the fourth century and contains the complete New Testament as well as portions of the Old Testament along with the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. This is a large document, with pages measuring 15 inches by 13 inches (38 cm by 32 cm) and four columns of writing on each page. It came to light in 1844 when Constantin von Tischendorf was visiting the ancient monastery of St Catherine in the foothills of Mount Sinai and noticed some leaves of the Old Testament part of the codex in a basket about to be burned in the monastery furnace. After complex negotiations he managed to obtain the entire codex and eventually it was purchased by the British Museum in London, where it is still kept.

Codex Alexandrinus (referred to as A) dates from the first half of the fourth century, and also originally contained the complete Bible along with two epistles of Clement of Rome and the Psalms of Solomon. Most of the latter, along with small sections of the New Testament, are now lost. It may have been written in Alexandria (Egypt), but it was from Constantinople that it was presented to Charles I of England, and it has been in the British Museum since its foundation. The text is generally regarded as less useful than what is contained in Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus.

Codex Vaticanus (known as B) dates from the fourth century and was also originally a complete Bible, from which most of Genesis, some of the Psalms, part of Hebrews, the Pastoral Letters (1–2 Timothy and Titus) and Revelation have disappeared. It has been in the Vatican Library at Rome since 1431, and along with Codex Sinaiticus is highly prized as the most authoritative ancient source for the text of the New Testament.

Codex Bezae (known as D) probably dates from the fifth century. Its pages are smaller than the others, only 10 inches by 8 inches (25 cm by 20 cm), and it has a Greek and a Latin text on opposite pages, though it only contains the gospels and Acts, with a few verses from the general epistles. Its early history is unknown, but it was bought at Lyons in France in 1562 by Theodore Beza, who presented it to the University of Cambridge in England. It is of great interest to textual scholars as it contains, particularly in Acts, a very different type of text from what is found in the other great codices.

Codex Ephraemi (known as C) dates from the fifth century. It originally contained the whole Bible, but out of an original 238 New Testament pages only 145 remain, though these represent all the New Testament books with the exception of 2 Thessalonians and 2 John. This codex is what is known as a palimpsest, a derivative of a Greek word (palímpsēstos) meaning ‘rubbed again’. Vellum writing material was very valuable in the ancient world and it was a common practice to erase the original writing and reuse it for a new book. In this case, what had originally been a Bible was used for the works of St Ephraim of Syria (hence its name). It is kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Other manuscripts

There are almost 3,000 minuscule manuscripts, so called because of the style of writing (‘minuscule’ or lower case letters). They are mostly of later date and are obviously copies of inferior manuscripts, though one group of them is of particular interest because it contains a distinctive form of text that may have

been connected with the traditions of the church in Caesarea. Early versions of New Testament passages are also preserved in ancient lectionaries (selections for use in church worship).

Early translations (versions)

Translations of the New Testament from the original Greek into other languages are generally referred to as ‘versions’. The most significant ancient examples are in Syriac, Coptic and Latin. A particularly interesting text is the Diatessaron of Tatian (c. AD 120–180). This consists of a single account of the life and teaching of Jesus created by bringing together material from all four gospels and it was used as the standard gospel in the Syrian church until the fifth century. Arabic and Coptic versions of this work have also been found.

Quotations in early Christian writings

Many early Christian writers are witnesses to the text of the New Testament through the quotations from it that they included in their own writings. Unfortunately, accurate quotation was not as much appreciated in the ancient world as it is today, which limits the usefulness of many of these examples. The most important of these writers in relation to understanding the development of New Testament textual traditions is Origen (AD 185–254), who appears to have used one form of text while he was living in Alexandria and then adopted a different one when he moved to Caesarea.

Scribes and copyists

Considering that these documents were all copied by hand, it is surprising how few and relatively unimportant are the differences between them. Substantial differences occur in well under 1 per cent of the entire text, and most of these are predictable errors that copyists might easily make. These include spelling mistakes, sometimes caused by a scribe writing down a word that was more familiar than the one that had actually been dictated. Sometimes a word, or even a whole line, was left out, which would be an easy mistake to make when two consecutive lines began with the same word. The same word might be written twice over, or a sentence unconsciously altered to make it agree with the words of a similar sentence elsewhere. This could happen very easily when the same story or saying occurred in slightly different words in one gospel than in the others. A note made by a reader in the margin could also be included in the main body of the text as if it were a part of it. This is probably what happened in the case of 1 John 5:7, which contains a clear statement of the later doctrine of the Trinity. This verse was included in the Latin Vulgate and some other manuscripts used by the translators of the 1611 Authorised (King James) Version, though it does not appear in any of the oldest codices which is why it is either excluded altogether or placed in a footnote in modern translations. Very occasionally, scholars suspect that a text has been changed a little to suit the copyist's theology. For instance, in some Latin versions of John 1:13 the plural 'were born' appears as the singular 'was born', in what looks like an effort to suggest a reference to Jesus' virgin birth.

Classifying texts

By comparing the actual words of different documents it has been possible to develop a system for classifying texts into groups, on the assumption that if one particular ancient manuscript had a distinctive form of words then all those that were copied from this one would be likely to have the same unusual reading. The definitive classification of texts was first set out in 1870 by Brooke Foss Westcott and F. J. A. Hort. More recently, some scholars have placed doubts against their scheme. But their identification of four textual types is still widely adopted by most scholars, albeit with some modifications.

Syrian

These texts contain many readings not found in the oldest manuscripts or versions, but seem to have been used extensively from the fourth century onwards, particularly by writers living in the neighbourhood of Antioch. Westcott and Hort proposed that a revised text of the New Testament had been issued at Antioch towards the end of the third century, from which a great many of the minuscule manuscripts now known were copied. These Syrian texts are of little value in helping to identify the original text of the various books, as their variant readings are presumably the work of the revisers at Antioch.

Western

These are best represented by the Codex Bezae and the sixth-century Codex Claromontanus along with a few minor manuscripts. They are also found in the Old Latin and Syrian versions. These tend to include considerable additions not found in other texts, often paraphrasing narratives and expanding them by

adding extra details about places and personalities. For example in Acts 12:10 it includes the information that when Peter escaped from prison he went down seven steps, while in Acts 19:9 it states that Paul taught in the lecture hall of Tyrannus from the fifth to the tenth hour, and in Acts 19:28 Demetrius is described as running out ‘into the street’ during the riot at Ephesus. These additions have generally not been taken seriously as part of the original text, though when this Western text omits something (for instance, the mention of a second cup at the last supper in Luke 22:20), its value is likely to be taken more seriously, for its general tendency is towards addition rather than omission. As this textual tradition was the first to be translated into Latin, it is considered likely that it was used by churches in the western part of the Roman empire.

Alexandrian

This type of text is found in the Codex Alexandrinus, and Codex Ephraemi, as well as in the writings of many Christian leaders who were resident in Egypt. Its distinctive characteristics are more related to style than subject matter, perhaps originating in the understandable concern of Christian scribes in the scholarly context of Alexandria to ensure that the text of their New Testament would be available in high-quality Greek. If that was the reason for its production, then the Alexandrian texts obviously add little or nothing to our knowledge of the original text written by the New Testament authors.

Neutral

These are the ones which have most in common with other texts. Whenever a particular manuscript diverges from others in the same group, it generally reverts to this neutral text, which is the form represented by the two oldest and largest codices, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. When these two agree (as they almost invariably do), that is likely to be as near to the original text of the New Testament as it is possible to be.

Textual study is ongoing, and two particular developments are worth commenting on:

As well as the four classic text types listed above, some scholars believe they can identify another group which shares some of the characteristics of both Neutral and Western texts. This is the so-called Caesarean text type. Some of the minuscule manuscripts have common peculiarities, such as the placing of the story of the woman taken in adultery which in theTextus Receptus(‘Received Text’ that formed the basis of the King James Version) was at John 7:53–8:11, but which could also be placed after Luke 21:38, or even left out altogether. Luke 21:38 seems a more likely place for the story as it is more in the style of Luke than of John. The Chester Beatty Papyrus I has a Caesarean text in Mark’s Gospel, and one with some Caesarean characteristics in Luke and John, although its text of Acts is Neutral. The precise characteristics of this textual style are still less clearly defined than the others, but when Origen left Alexandria and moved to Caesarea inAD231, his quotations from the New Testament seem to show that he gave up using the Alexandrian text and used a different form of text similar to this (hence the reason why it has been called the Caesarean text).

The Western text has generally been accorded more value, the more it has been studied. Many early Christian writers seem to have used this Western text in quoting from the New Testament, which suggests it must have been reasonably early in date. Moreover, much of its additional material seems quite pointless unless it belonged to an original source: there is no obvious reason why anyone would wish to invent details like the number of steps Peter took from prison, for example. Could it be that Luke wrote different drafts of Acts, and this textual tradition reflects one of them? The presence of a number of Aramaic turns of expression in the Western text also adds to the impression that it may be of early date.

For all that, the Neutral text is still regarded as the most authoritative, though textual experts are generally prepared to consider variations from it on good grounds. Textual criticism is a painstaking business and the value of each particular variant in the text must be decided on its own merits, by asking such questions as:

Which reading gives the better sense?

Which reading is least likely to have been made through a mistake in copying?

Which reading is most likely to be due to later theological influences such as (for example) Gnosticism?

Which reading is supported by the oldest and most reliable manuscripts, even although it may not be found in the best examples of the Neutral text?

GLOSSARY

Agrippa II (AD 28–c. 100)

Son of Agrippa I (Herod Agrippa), great-grandson of Herod the Great, and the last reigning member of the Herodian Dynasty. He ruled a mostly Gentile kingdom, under Roman appointment, that eventually included Galilee and parts of Judea. In Acts 25–26, Paul, under arrest, defends himself before Agrippa II just before his departure to Rome to pursue his appeal to Caesar. See also Herod, Herod Antipas.

Allegory

A type of story whose various elements point symbolically to realities outside the story world. Although an allegory may be considered a type of parable, most scholars think Jesus did not tell allegories.

Ananias

(1) The high priest who presided at the trial of Paul at Jerusalem and Caesarea. (2) A member of the first Christian community who, with his wife Sapphira, attempted to defraud their church. (3) A member of the Christian community in Damascus who baptized Saul.

Annas

Served for ten years (AD 6–15) as high priest but was deposed by the Roman authorities. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, and he remained a powerful figure after his removal from office. According to John's Gospel, Jesus was brought before him for trial.

Annunciation

Gabriel's message to Mary that she would bear a son, Jesus, who would be the Son of God.

Antichrist

Though popularly understood as a single great adversary of Christ, the word is used in the Johannine letters to describe any who deny that Jesus is the Christ.

Antipater

The father of Herod the Great, who built alliances with Rome and interfered in Judean politics.

Apocalyptic literature

A type of writing in exilic and post-exilic Judaism involving a revelation given

to a human subject by a heavenly messenger. The revelation can consist of secrets of the heavenly realm and/or a divinely ordained plan for history. Apocalypses of the historical type generally focus on a dramatic end to history followed by the resurrection of the righteous to eternal life.

Apocrypha

A term used by Protestants to refer to a collection of ancient Jewish writings, most of which were included in the Septuagint but did not become a part of the final canon of the Hebrew Bible. They are considered ‘deuterocanonical’ (belonging to a second level of canonicity) by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The literal meaning of the term is ‘hidden’. See Pseudepigrapha.

Apostle

Literally ‘one who is sent’ – an emissary, agent, or ambassador. The Christian usage seems related to a Hebrew term with similar meaning. In the early church, an apostle was understood as someone belonging to the first generation of Christians with a special divine commission for mission and leadership. The circle of apostles included, but was not limited to, ‘the Twelve’ – those believed to have been called into leadership by Jesus himself. Paul considered himself an apostle and was apparently widely accepted as such, and he recognized a few others beyond the Twelve as having this status also.

Apostolic Council

Also called the Council of Jerusalem or Apostolic Conference, a name applied by historians to an early Christian council, probably in AD 49, which is

described in Acts 15.

Ascension

The post-resurrection stories of Jesus' ascent into heaven reflecting the particular occasion when he left the disciples in a dramatic and memorable way and after which they saw him no more. The ascension as a discrete narrative is found only in Luke's account.

Atonement

An act of reconciliation, often achieved through a sacrifice, indicating that sins or divisions have been dealt with.

Babylonian Empire

More technically designated Neo-Babylonian, an empire that flourished from 625 to 529 BC Centred in the city of Babylon in Mesopotamia, it extended westward and included Palestine. In 587, following an attempt of Judah to gain independence, the Babylonians sent the ruling class into exile in Babylon. The period from that point until 538, when the conquering Persian king decreed that the Judahites could return home, is known as the Babylonian exile.

Baptism

The Christian rite of initiation into the church, originally practised by John the Baptist and likely by groups before him.

Beatitudes

A set of blessings from Jesus recorded in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1–12 and – in a different form – the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20–22. See Sermon on the Mount.

Caesar

A generic term used for an imperial ruler, especially a Roman emperor.

Canon

A Greek word designating a reed and, by extension, anything straight (as reeds are straight). This term also took on the metaphorical meaning of ‘rule’, ‘measure’, or ‘standard’, so in the early church, it was applied to religious law and doctrine and to a list of writings understood to provide an authoritative standard of faith. The various books of the Bible thus constitute a canon, and those included are termed ‘canonical’.

Centurion

A Roman officer in charge of approximately a hundred soldiers.

Christ

The ‘Messiah’, from the Hebrew mashiach meaning ‘anointed one’. See also Messiah.

Christology

An area of theological discourse concerned with the person of Jesus Christ, particularly with how the divine and human aspects of Jesus are related to one another.

Codex

An ancient text in book form rather than scroll form.

Corinth

A wealthy Greek city, conquered by Rome in 146 BC, in which Paul founded an important Christian church around AD 50.

Covenant

In Hebrew thought, a relationship between God (Yahweh) and the people of Israel, including two components: God's promise to be with the people (evidenced by God's prior actions on their behalf) and the people's obligation to serve and obey God.

Dead Sea Scrolls

A collection of ancient scrolls preserved in caves on the north-west shores of the Dead Sea and discovered in the 1940s. See also Essenes, Qumrân.

Diaspora

A Greek word meaning 'dispersion'. In biblical studies, it refers to the Jewish people living outside the homeland, beginning in the period of the Babylonian exile.

Diatribe

A type of argumentation, probably used in philosophical schools, in which the speaker (or writer) uses vivid images and rhetorical questions to take up and refute arguments of imaginary opponents.

Docetism

From a Greek word meaning 'to think' or 'to seem', the doctrine, considered

heretical by what emerged as ‘mainstream’ Christianity, that Jesus, as a divine being, only seemed to have a physical body. Many forms of Gnosticism embraced a docetic Christology.

Eschatology

Literally, ‘words about the end’, hence teaching regarding the ‘last things’, the end of history, or of the present age.

Essenes

A Jewish faction in the Hellenistic period, characterized by sectarian teachings and strict community discipline. They do not appear in the New Testament but are mentioned in other ancient sources. The majority of scholars identify the community at Qumrân, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, as Essenes. See also Dead Sea Scrolls, Qumrân.

Eucharist

From the Greek word for ‘giving thanks’, the Christian sharing of consecrated bread and wine, also called ‘the Lord’s Supper’ or ‘communion’.

Evangelist

The writer of a gospel, from the Greek euangelion (‘good news’).

Exegesis

From a Greek term whose root meaning has to do with leading out, a statement, a narrative, or an interpretation. In biblical studies, exegesis is systematic interpretation of the meaning of a text. See Hermeneutics.

Existentialist interpretation

An approach to biblical interpretation first proposed by the German scholar and theologian Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann's method involved looking for an 'existential' meaning – a meaning not dependent upon supernatural categories, but referring to human existence as all persons experience it.

Exodus, the

The event recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exodus 14) wherein God, acting through Moses, led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, parting the waters of the sea for them as they went.

Form criticism

A method of biblical criticism that analyses the narrative forms of the text to help determine the purpose of each form in community practices, which in turn helps illuminate the passage's meaning.

Fourth Gospel

The Gospel of John, written last chronologically and appearing last of the four in traditional biblical orders.

Galilee

A region in northern Palestine where Jesus grew up (in the town of Nazareth) and carried out most of his ministry.

Gentiles

A term derived from a Latin expression used to translate Greek and Hebrew words that literally mean ‘the nations’, employed only when those words are taken to have the specific connotation of non-Jews as opposed to Jews. Gentile thus means ‘non-Jew’.

Gethsemane

A garden at the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed with his disciples after the Last Supper.

Gnosticism

A modern term, based upon the Greek word for knowledge (gnōsis), that refers to a wide range of religious teachings dating from the second century AD (and perhaps earlier). Gnostics typically claimed to possess a knowledge, which other Christians did not share, that ensured their immortality. They also tended to see the physical universe as completely under the sway of evil, so that the goal of religious enlightenment was the eventual escape of a divine spark within the individual from this world into the realm of light.

Gospel(s)

From an Anglo-Saxon (and Middle English) term meaning ‘good news’, a translation of the Greek euangelion, which had the same meaning and was used in the first century to celebrate official ‘good news’ concerning the Roman emperor. In New Testament Christianity, the gospel is first of all the message, or proclamation, about Jesus Christ. By extension, it is also applied to the four narratives of Jesus’ life in the New Testament.

Hebrew Bible

The books of the Jewish Bible, written originally in Hebrew and Aramaic. In Christian parlance, this or similar collections are often called the Old Testament.

Hellenism

A term referring to Greek culture. It is most frequently applied to the culture of the Hellenistic Age (see Hellenistic Age).

Hellenistic Age

Most narrowly, the period from the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC) to the ascendancy of Octavian (later to become Caesar Augustus) in 31 BC. But Hellenistic culture permeated the Roman imperial period also.

Hermeneutics

A technical term relating to the process of interpretation. Once used to simply indicate the rules of interpretation, it has taken on two broader connotations. One is philosophical reflection on the conditions under which the understanding of the text takes place. The other is methodology for extracting meaning from the text, most especially methodology designed to overcome a specific problem, such as discrepancy between the worldview of the text and that of the interpreter.

Herod

A native of Idumea who was appointed ‘king of the Jews’ by the Roman emperor and came to be called Herod the Great. He reigned as a vassal of the Romans from 37 to 4 BC. He appears in the Gospel of Matthew as a jealous king seeking the life of the child Jesus.

Herod Antipas

A son of Herod the Great, who ruled Galilee and Perea after his father's death. He appears in the New Testament as the Herod who questions Jesus in Jerusalem prior to his trial.

Historical criticism

An approach to the study of materials from the past that attempts to place them in their original historical contexts; often called the historical-critical method. Interpreters employing this method seek objectivity by trying to take up a disinterested attitude towards the results of investigation, distancing themselves from their own beliefs and commitments. They try to bridge the gap between their own worldview and that of the materials in view by immersing themselves in the historical world of the latter.

Historical Jesus

A term used by modern scholars referring to the historical person of Jesus Christ and the modern attempt to reconstruct what his life was like using not only biblical sources but any other historical resources available.

Holy Spirit

In the Jewish Scriptures, the power and/or presence of God, operative in such divine activities as empowering heroes, inspiring rulers and prophets, creating the world, and sustaining life. The Spirit was also associated with the eschatological expectation, and in the New Testament it is understood as descending upon Jesus and as empowering both individual Christians and the church collectively. In post-New Testament times, Christian theology defined the

Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, alongside the Father and the Son.

John the Baptist

Son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. A wilderness ascetic who preached repentance of sins and the imminence of the kingdom of God. He baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and announced that Jesus was greater than himself.

Josephus, Flavius

A Jewish historian living in the first century AD. A commander of Jewish forces during the war against Rome in 66–70, he gained favour with the Romans following his surrender. Residing in Rome and living on an imperial pension, he spent his remaining years writing. Although his works must be used critically, they are an important source for the period.

Judah

The name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and of one of the twelve sons of Jacob, whom tradition named as the ancestors of these tribes. Upon the division of ancient Israel into northern and southern monarchies after the death of Solomon, the southern region took the old tribal name Judah as its designation. In the period after the Babylonian exile, this region became known as Judea.

Judaizer

A person who claims that Christians must observe the laws of the Hebrew Bible.

Judea

See Judah.

Kingdom of God

Most basically, God's action in the manner of a monarch, reigning over human society, and also the sphere of such action. The notion underwent many changes over the course of time. In the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions, it came to refer to a time in the future, but in the wisdom tradition, it meant something always present. There is much scholarly debate as to its precise meaning in the teaching of Jesus.

Last Supper

Jesus' last meal with his followers, observed in conjunction with the Passover feast according to the synoptic gospels.

Logos

A Greek term with a wide range of meanings, including 'word', 'speech', 'subject', 'reckoning', and 'reason'. The Stoics used it to indicate both the divine principle in which all reality coheres and a spark of divinity within each human

being. The Gospel of John uses it to indicate God’s eternal Word that became incarnate in Jesus.

LXX

Abbreviation for the Septuagint. See Septuagint.

Maccabean Revolt

The insurgency of the Jewish people, led by one Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus (‘The Hammer’), against the Seleucids (one of the Hellenistic monarchies) in 168–164 BC. It eventually resulted in victory and the founding of the Hasmonean Dynasty.

Mediterranean world

The area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, including Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Israel/Palestine, and the northern coast of Africa. Anthropologists identify certain cultural traits that bound this broad area together in ancient times.

Messiah

Literally ‘anointed’, in Judaism, the kingly figure expected to serve as God’s agent in bringing in an age of peace and justice in the future. Rooted in the

ideology surrounding the reign of David, the concept developed over a great expanse of time and probably did not take its final form until after the time of Jesus.

Messianic secret

A literary motif, most prominent in the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus tells his followers not to reveal that he is the Messiah.

Midrash

A type of Jewish commentary on the Scriptures intended to explain their meaning and apply them to the situations in which the interpreters lived.

Mishnah

In the broad sense, Jewish laws passed on orally rather than in written form; eventually applied to a written compilation of such materials, arranged topically, in the second century AD.

Mystery religions

A term applied to a broad range of religious phenomena in the Hellenistic world, characterized by initiation through secret rites, that generally promised a renewed life in the present and immortality after death.

Nag Hammadi

A city on the Nile in upper Egypt where farmers discovered a collection of ancient Gnostic manuscripts in 1945.

Old Testament

See Hebrew Bible.

Palestine

As used in relation to the ancient world, the preferred term to refer to the total area in which the ancient Israelites, the twelve tribes, had their homeland. The term Palestine is derived from the name of one of the tribes of the ‘sea people’, the Philistines, who entered the land in the early twelfth century BC and struggled with the Israelites for domination. Some recent scholars use the term ‘Jewish Palestine’, indicating that in the period in question, the region was home to Jewish society and religion.

Parable

A story suggesting metaphorical meaning but demanding creative interpretation on the part of the audience. The parables of Jesus must be distinguished from allegories, which have a more definite and limited range of meaning. See also Allegory.

Paraclete

A Greek word meaning ‘advocate’. In John’s Gospel, the term is used for the Holy Spirit and to describe Jesus’ ongoing presence with his disciples.

Parousia

A term to describe the second coming of Christ, when he will restore and renew all things.

Passover

A Jewish festival commemorating the exodus from Egypt. See also Exodus.

Performance criticism

An approach to the New Testament texts that takes account of the scribal media of the first-century Roman world, emphasizing their origin as oral presentations, and the ways in which they were delivered to their first recipients as community performance rather than private reading.

Pharisees

A Jewish faction in the Hellenistic period. Rivals of the Sadducees, they advocated strict obedience to the details of the law and held certain beliefs, such as the resurrection of the dead, not contained in the Torah. They appear in the gospels, where they receive extremely negative characterizations (especially in Matthew), as opponents of Jesus.

Pilate, Pontius

The Roman prefect of Judea, 26–36 AD, who presided at the trial of Jesus.

Q

From the German Quelle, meaning ‘source’. A hypothetical document purported to have been used by the authors of Matthew and Luke, defined primarily by the material these two have in common with each other but not appearing in Mark.

Qumrân

An ancient settlement near the Dead Sea, uncovered in twentieth-century excavations; the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The majority of scholars believe that Qumrân was inhabited by Essenes. See also Essenes, Qumrân.

Rabbi

At first, a title accorded to revered teachers. In the period following the establishment of the academy at Yabneh after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, there was a succession of such rabbis, and the type of Judaism they helped fashion became known as Rabbinic Judaism. In time, the rabbinate became a formalized status marked by ordination.

Rhetorical criticism

A study of texts in light of the standardized forms of expression (rhetoric) employed in the ancient world.

Sabbath

The seventh day of the week, a day on which Jews typically refrain from working. Jesus was criticized for not observing the customary Sabbath strictures of the day.

Sadducees

A Jewish faction in the Hellenistic period, drawn from the upper echelons of the priesthood and thus belonging to the ruling class. Rivals of the Pharisees, they were concerned primarily with the Temple cult and rejected all beliefs (such as resurrection of the dead) not found in the Torah. They appear in the gospels as opponents of Jesus, although not as frequently as the scribes and Pharisees.

Samaria

The region in Palestine to the north of Judea and the south of Galilee. The Samaritans were bitter enemies of the Jews. The two peoples shared roots in the ancient Hebrew faith, but the Samaritans were at this point a separate society with their own version of the Torah, which constituted their sole canon, and for a time they had their own temple.

Sanhedrin

The supreme Jewish court, consisting of Pharisees and Saducees and led by the high priest.

Scribes

Persons skilled in such tasks as copying documents and keeping records. The Temple employed scribes, who were responsible for copying the Torah and were considered experts in its interpretation. In the New Testament, ‘the scribes’ are usually portrayed in a negative light and associated with the Pharisees as opponents of Jesus.

Septuagint

The Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures, abbreviated LXX (for the number ‘seventy’). The traditional story of this edition held that around seventy Palestinian scholars had done the translation.

Sermon on the Mount

A collection of Jesus' sayings found in Matthew 5–7. See Beatitudes.

Social-scientific criticism

In biblical studies, a broad term indicating any approach to a text that employs methods drawn from the social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology.

Soteriology

An area of theological discourse concerned with the 'work' of Jesus Christ, particularly how his birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection affect the relationship humanity and creation have with God.

Source criticism

A critical method that seeks to discover the written sources of a document.

Synoptic gospels

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three gospels are designated the ‘synoptics’ (meaning ‘seeing together’) as they share a great deal of wording and sequence in common.

Synoptic problem

The question of the literary relationships among the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), raised by the complicated pattern of similarities and differences among them.

Talmud

A large collection of Jewish religious writings in two parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara, dating from the period AD 200–500.

Textual criticism

A critical method that analyses ancient manuscripts to uncover errors made by copyists and then to reconstruct, as closely as possible, the earliest available form of the document.

Torah

The first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, understood to be the most important part and attributed to Moses. The root meaning of the word has to do

with pointing the way, and it is sometimes translated as ‘instruction’. The Torah contains both law and narrative, but it was translated in the Septuagint as nomos, the Greek word for ‘law’.

Two-document hypothesis

The predominant solution to the synoptic problem; the view that Mark was the first of the synoptic gospels written and that the authors of Matthew and Luke drew upon both Mark and another document, which scholars term Q.

Wisdom

A type of literature found in the Hebrew Scriptures that involves reflection on life as ordinarily experienced, apart from specific reference to distinctively Hebraic notions such as covenant. In a philosophical strain of this tradition, there eventually emerged the personified figure of Wisdom – imaged as a female, because of the feminine gender of the noun – who was present with God at creation and whose presence permeates the universe. There is evidence that the notion of personified Wisdom played a part in the development of Christology.

Yahweh

The distinctive Hebrew name for God. According to ancient tradition, this sacred name should not be pronounced, except once a year by the high priest in the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple.

Zealots

A coalition of freedom fighters probably formed in a late phase of the Jewish rebellion against Rome in AD 66–70. At one time, scholars believed the Zealots were a longstanding revolutionary party that would have been active during the time of Jesus, but the recent trend is away from this view.

OTHER RESOURCES ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

The additional resources listed here do not provide anything like a comprehensive bibliography of the subjects covered in this book, but have been included because they offer more in-depth treatment of topics that have only been mentioned briefly. Books such as commentaries have been excluded, largely because there are so many excellent series now available that they would have expanded the length of this list very considerably. Readers will also find access to substantial further resources at http://www.ntgateway.com/

General

P. Achtemeier, J. B. Green, & M. Meye Thompson, Introducing the New Testament: its Literature and Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)

Richard Cooke, New Testament (London: SCM, 2009)

David A. deSilva, An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

L. T. Johnson, The New Testament: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Scot McKnight & Grant R. Osborne (eds), The Face of New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004)

Mark Allan Powell, Introducing the New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009)

R. A. Spivey, D. Moody Smith, & C. Clifton Black, Anatomy of the New Testament 7th ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013)

The world of the New Testament

Gregory S. Aldrete, Life in the Roman City (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004)

C. K. Barrett, The New Testament Background: Selected Documents (London: SPCK, 1987)

Helen K. Bond, Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

George J. Brooke, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament (London: SPCK, 2005)

Warren Carter, Seven Events That Shaped the New Testament World (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013)

Mark Chancey, Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

James H. Charlesworth (ed), Jesus and Archaeology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006)

Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity 3rd ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)

Joel B. Green & Lee Martin McDonald (eds), The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013)

K. C. Hanson & Douglas E. Oakman, Palestine at the Time of Jesus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998)

Moyer V. Hubbard, Christianity in the Greco-Roman World (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010)

Bruce W. Longenecker, The Lost Letters of Pergamum: a Story from the New Testament World (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003)

Wayne A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians: the Social World of the Apostle Paul 2nd ed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)

J. Neusner, Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)

Birger A. Pearson, Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007)

P. Perkins, Gnosticism and the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993)

Calvin J. Roetzel, The World That Shaped the New Testament (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002)

Anthony J. Saldarini, Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)

Brad H. Young, Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thoughts and the Teaching of Jesus (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007)

Jesus and the Gospels

Stephen C. Barton (ed), The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Richard Bauckham (ed), The Gospels for All Christians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998)

Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006)

Craig L. Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of the Gospels 2nd ed (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007)

Craig L. Blomberg, Interpreting the Parables 2nd ed (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012)

Marcus J. Borg, Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

Marcus J. Borg & N. T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999)

Richard A. Burridge, Imitating Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007)

J. T. Carroll & J. B. Green (eds), The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995)

J. D. Crossan, Who Killed Jesus? (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995)

Gregory W. Dawes (ed), The Historical Jesus Quest (Louisville: Westminster

John Knox Press, 1999)

J. D. G. Dunn, Jesus Remembered (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003)

J. D. G. Dunn, A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed (London: SPCK, 2005)

Paul Foster, The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin (eds), Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels 2nd ed (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013)

Jonathan Knight, Jesus: An Historical and Theological Investigation (London: Continuum, 2004)

Alyce M. Mckenzie, The Parables for Today (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007)

Scot McKnight, The Story of the Christ (London: Continuum, 2005)

Marvin Meyer, The Secret Gospels of Jesus (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005)

Frederick J. Murphy, An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005)

Pheme Perkins, Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007)

Stanley E. Porter (ed), Reading the Gospels Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004)

David Rhoads et al, Mark as Story 3rd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)

Eckhard J. Schnabel, Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

Graham Stanton, The Gospels and Jesus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Graham Stanton, Jesus and Gospel: How the Oral Gospel Became a Fourfold Canon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Gerd Theissen, The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest for the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form Rev ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)

Robert E. Van Voorst, Jesus Outside the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000)

Antoinette Clark Wire, The Case for Mark Composed in Performance (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011)

Paul

Richard S. Ascough, What Are They Saying about the Formation of Pauline Churches? (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998)

Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community 2nd ed (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994)

Jouette M. Bassler, Navigating Paul: an Introduction to Key Theological Concepts (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007)

Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary behind the Church's Conservative Icon (New York: HarperOne, 2009)

Andrew D. Clarke, A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership (London: T & T Clark, 2008)

J. D. G. Dunn (ed), The Cambridge Companion to St Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

J. D. G. Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008)

Michael J. Gorman, Reading Paul (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2008)

Patrick Gray, Opening Paul's Letters (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012)

Geoffrey Harris, Paul (London: SCM, 2009)

Gerald F. Hawthorne & Ralph P. Martin (eds), Dictionary of Paul and His Letters (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993)

David Horrell, An Introduction to the Study of Paul 2nd ed (London: T & T Clark, 2006)

Lars Kierspel, Charts on the Life, Letters, and Theology of Paul (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012)

S. Kim, Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002)

Helmut Koester, Paul and His World (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007)

Veronica Koperski, What Are They Saying About Paul and the Law? (Mahwah:

Paulist Press, 2001)

Joseph M. Marchal, Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)

Robert L. Plummer & John Mark Terry (eds), Paul's Missionary Methods in His Time and Ours (Nottingham: IVP, 2013)

S. E. Porter (ed), Paul and His Opponents (Leiden: Brill, 2005)

S. E. Porter (ed), Paul's World (Leiden: Brill, 2008)

E. Randolph Richards, Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

Eckhard J. Schnabel, Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

Eckhard J. Schnabel, Paul the Missionary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008)

James W. Thompson, Pastoral Ministry According to Paul (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006)

Stephen Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004)

N. T. Wright, Paul in Fresh Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009)

Life in the early church

Robert & Julia Banks, The Church Comes Home (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998)

Richard Bauckham, Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990)

Paul Barnett, The Birth of Christianity: the First Twenty Years (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005)

Vincent Branick, The House Church in the Writings of Paul (Wilmington: Glazier, 1989)

R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, & J. Reumann, Peter in the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1973)

R. E. Brown, The Community of the Beloved Disciple (New York: Paulist, 1979)

R. E. Brown & J. P. Maier, Antioch and Rome (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983)

F. F. Bruce, Peter, Stephen, James and John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980)

Bruce Chilton & Jacob Neusner, The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)

Andrew D. Clarke, Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000)

J. D. G. Dunn, The Partings of the Ways (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991)

J. D. G. Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the New Testament 3rd ed (London: SCM Press, 2006)

J. D. G. Dunn, Beginning from Jerusalem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009)

Paula Gooder, Phoebe (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2018)

M. Hengel, Between Jesus and Paul (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983)

Luke T. Johnson, Brother of Jesus, Friend of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

2004)

Simon M. Jones, A Social History of the Early Church (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2018)

Hans-Josef Klauck, Ancient Letters and the New Testament (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006)

William J. Larkin & Joel F. Williams (eds), Mission in the New Testament (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998)

Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids (eds), Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997)

Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, & Janet H. Tulloch, A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005)

Arthur G. Patzia, The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership, and Worship (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001)

Richard V. Peace, Conversion in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999)

Ben Witherington, Women and the Genesis of Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

New Testament interpretation

David A. Black, Textual Criticism: a Concise Guide (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994)

Ian Boxall, New Testament Interpretation (Norwich: SCM Press, 2007)

Richard J. Erickson, A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Exegesis: Taking the Fear Out of Critical Method (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005)

Gordon D. Fee, New Testament Exegesis: a Handbook for Students and Pastors 3rd ed (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002)

Joel B. Green (ed), Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010)

Daniel J. Harrington, Interpreting the New Testament: A Practical Guide (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990)

I. Howard Marshall, New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

INDEX

A

Abraham 190, 194, 287, 370, 391–92, 409–10, 451, 452, 493, 501–502, 528, 539–40, 543, 550–53

Acts of the Apostles 11, 15–17, 22, 24, 25, 29–32, 35, 38, 40, 44, 53, 66, 73–74, 81, 83, 87, 90, 108, 132, 164, 173, 197, 209, 212, 225–27, 229, 236, 238, 247, 249, 252, 260, 279, 284–85, 288, 307, 312, 325, 327, 330, 336–44, 346–53, 355–70, 372–74, 379–80, 382–91, 393–95, 397–98, 402, 405–406, 412–20, 427–28, 430–32, 434, 441, 461, 463–65, 467–70, 487, 490–91, 494, 496, 506, 511, 514–15, 518, 523, 526–27, 531, 533–34, 538–39, 542, 551, 557, 559, 561, 575, 588, 592, 594–98, 602–603, 605, 616, 623–24, 626–30

see also Luke

Africa 126, 308, 334, 348, 355, 636

Alexander the Great 20–21, 38, 56, 634

Alexandria 15, 48, 51–52, 66, 71, 81, 278, 280, 284, 297, 335, 354, 356, 400, 429, 434, 466, 542, 545, 623, 625, 627–28

Andrew 15, 88, 355, 561, 581

angels 75, 140, 150, 228–30, 288, 340, 370, 539, 547, 553, 563, 570

Anselm 220

Antichrist 564, 571, 629

Antioch in Pisidia 335, 354, 384, 399, 401, 408, 429

Antioch in Syria 15, 16, 262, 285, 335, 347, 351, 354, 382, 384–87, 389, 397–99, 408, 413, 428, 429, 471, 588, 591, 595, 613, 626

Antiochus IV Epiphanes 57–58, 76, 86

Apocalyptic writings 75–77, 126–28, 133, 502, 563–67, 572

see also Eschatology; Revelation

Apocrypha 174–75, 246, 630

Apollos 433–35, 545

apostles, apostleship 150, 225, 227, 247, 249, 284, 293, 302–303, 327, 338, 340, 342, 348, 350, 355–56, 358, 360, 361, 371, 376, 380, 382–83, 385–87, 390, 394, 397, 403, 408, 412, 420, 431, 433, 439, 441–43, 445–48, 461–62, 467–68, 485, 489, 493, 509, 515–16, 518, 524, 526, 531, 544, 545, 548, 557, 559, 561, 572, 574, 577, 580–81, 585–86, 588–90, 596–600, 602–603, 610–11, 630

Aramaic 13, 47, 103, 107, 122–23, 134, 145, 147, 156, 162, 259, 280, 300, 307, 314, 342, 375, 496, 532, 628, 633

Artemis 28, 29, 31, 430

Ascension 229, 238–39, 288, 319, 355, 356, 630

asceticism 50, 472–74, 481–83, 520, 635

astrology 43, 416, 430, 616

atheism 40, 41, 375, 535, 612

Athens 28, 38, 40, 335, 354, 364, 373, 400, 416–18, 429, 616

Augustine 121, 150, 256, 492, 569

Augustus 20, 24, 36, 38, 61–62, 63, 97, 99, 571, 634

B

Babylon 37, 58, 76, 80–81, 173, 536, 562, 569, 615, 630, 631, 635

baptism 110, 113–14, 237, 254, 315, 504, 510, 555–56, 577, 592–93, 631

of Jesus 97–98, 114–15, 120, 139, 143, 237, 254–55, 269, 282, 298

Barnabas 22, 29, 32, 279, 325, 327, 383, 384–87, 389, 397, 398, 404, 405, 408, 413, 545, 588

epistle of 345, 603, 623

Beatitudes 631, 639

Bethany 201, 229, 297, 299

Bethlehem 60, 61, 95, 97

C

Caesarea 61, 66, 260, 262, 285, 327, 325, 347, 348–50, 354, 360, 383, 384, 399, 401, 428, 429, 464–66, 624–25, 627–28, 629

Caesarea Philippi 62, 65, 282, 285

Caligula 65, 66, 99

Canon, New Testament 146, 284, 321, 491, 536, 586, 602–603, 617, 630, 631, 638

Capernaum 278

Catholicism 320, 360, 390, 391, 454–55, 630

census 95, 97–100

Cephas see Peter

Cerinthus 577–78

charisma, charismatic see Holy Spirit; gifts of; Tongues

church 337–47, 390–96, 508–17, 590–92

and Jesus 161–63, 336–38, 395–96, 509–11, 561–67, 570

leadership 21, 420, 483–84, 489, 490, 514–16, 580, 595–97, 599, 630

relations between women and men 415, 433, 492, 517

structures of 121, 484, 489, 573, 588, 592–94

circumcise, circumcision 57, 78, 80, 90, 336, 387, 389, 398, 404–405, 409–11, 413, 455, 457, 463, 472–74, 481, 527, 533, 537–38, 550–51

see also Judaizers

Claudius 16, 25, 35, 66, 255, 549

life of 16

Clement of Alexandria 48, 278, 280, 284, 297, 355–56

of Rome 467, 602, 623

1 Clement 358, 467, 548, 557, 561, 590–91

Codex Sinaiticus 623–24

Colossae, Colossians 40, 45, 47, 50, 84, 215, 277, 279, 285, 354, 370, 373–74, 403, 428, 467, 469–77, 481–82, 484–85, 489, 503, 510, 520–21, 523, 547, 601

see also Philemon

Corinth, Corinthians 15, 32–33, 47, 50, 123, 129, 197, 227, 294, 327, 335, 351, 354, 359, 364, 375, 377, 400, 418–19, 428–29, 431–54, 467, 471–72, 479, 481–82, 484–86, 493, 506, 512–13, 515–20, 523–24, 573, 576–78, 583–84, 590–91, 597–99, 613, 631

1 Corinthians 11, 16, 23, 29, 33, 47–48, 116, 123, 125, 129, 197, 200, 209, 213–14, 217, 219, 225, 227, 233–34, 239, 253, 308, 325–27, 340, 351, 367–69, 374–77, 394–95, 403, 408, 412, 426, 430–48, 451, 464, 469, 477, 479, 489, 490, 496, 498, 502, 506–508, 510–16, 518–21, 524, 532, 553, 559, 561, 574, 576, 589,

596–99

2 Corinthians 17, 233, 326, 368, 375–76, 379, 381, 383, 394, 398, 430–33, 443–49, 451, 467, 469, 480, 489, 493, 496, 500, 503, 507–508, 515, 573, 597, 611

Cornelius 35, 53, 173, 350, 353, 382, 388–89, 527, 557

creation 49, 82, 170, 173, 181, 222, 265, 269, 295, 306, 319, 327, 413, 417–18, 477, 503–505, 519, 606, 616, 639–40

cross, crucifixion 14, 17, 114, 126, 132, 136, 138, 140, 144, 172, 197, 199, 209, 212–17, 219–22, 226, 234–37, 258, 279, 282–83, 289, 295–96, 314, 319, 330, 337, 346, 355, 370, 377–78, 435, 446, 460, 465, 473, 478, 494, 499–500, 538, 540, 557, 561, 577, 579, 588, 598, 615

Cyprus 22, 38, 66, 335, 359, 384, 397, 399, 401, 429, 466

D

Damascus 72, 227, 233, 347, 354, 372, 377, 378–85, 398, 405, 408, 460–61, 468, 479–80, 494–99, 501, 505–507, 509–11, 514, 629

Daniel, book of 133–35, 164, 238

David, King 58, 73, 101, 121, 136, 140, 290, 317, 536, 636, 641

Dead Sea Scrolls see Qumrân

death 21, 28, 45, 127, 214, 234, 239, 346–47, 413, 465, 467, 479, 506–508, 568

life after 70, 234, 432, 446, 506, 508

see also Resurrection

Descartes, René 612

disciples, discipleship 13–14, 17, 44, 66, 74, 77, 82, 83, 88, 90, 102, 106–107, 111, 132, 137, 139, 143, 147–49, 153, 157, 160, 162, 164–65, 169, 175, 181,

184, 186, 189, 192–94, 196, 198, 200–202, 205–207, 217, 222, 224, 227–36, 238–39, 246, 249, 258, 272, 278, 281–82, 284, 287–88, 291–92, 295–96, 298–99, 302, 308–309, 317, 330–32, 336–41, 348–51, 353, 355–57, 361–63, 366, 368, 383, 395–96, 408, 422, 471, 503–504, 509, 514, 526, 554, 561, 570, 581, 587–89, 594, 599–600, 602–603, 630, 633, 637

Dispersion see Jews, Diaspora

Docetism, Docetists 282, 548, 576–78, 579, 582–83, 585, 598, 632

Domitian 37, 571

E

economy 94, 115–16, 122, 178, 216, 393, 444, 471, 521–22, 589, 593, 608, 610, 613–14

education 11, 20–22, 62, 86–87, 107, 128, 366, 369, 523, 589

Elijah 110, 528

Emmaus 228–29, 231, 233, 238, 288

Enlightenment 296, 310, 317, 339, 439, 461, 482, 605, 607, 617–18, 633

Ephesians, letter to 24, 40, 327, 373, 476–77, 504, 510, 516, 520, 601

Ephesus 15, 29, 31, 178, 299–300, 303, 335, 354, 368, 399–400, 414, 428–32, 446, 463, 468–70, 472, 475–76, 482, 487, 562, 565, 572, 574, 577, 581–82, 626

Epicurus, Epicureans 40

eschatology 125–30, 169, 291, 323, 423, 424–25, 450, 504, 506, 611, 632, 635

see also Apocalyptic writings; Revelation

Essenes see Qumrân

ethics 126, 151, 161, 165, 183, 187, 189–95, 218, 254, 272, 300, 317, 331, 375, 379, 411, 434–35, 457, 478, 502, 504, 533–34, 560, 573, 582, 584–85

Ethiopia, Ethiopians 15, 348, 356

Eucharist 35, 136, 201, 441, 451, 593, 599, 632

Eusebius 148, 250, 278, 285, 297, 355, 358, 467, 531, 544, 561, 571, 581, 599, 603

exile 58, 63–64, 76, 78, 630–31, 635

Ezekiel 115, 133, 168, 449

F

faith 14, 16–18, 20–21, 23–25, 30, 35–36, 40, 42, 46–47, 50–53, 55–56, 59–60, 64, 66–67, 70, 72, 76, 80–84, 88, 90, 94, 98, 102, 104, 108, 110–11, 116, 119, 126–27, 131, 138, 150, 153, 156–57, 161, 168, 171–72, 178–80, 183, 195, 209, 216, 225–27, 231–35, 239, 244, 249–50, 253, 266, 269, 273–75, 280–82, 292, 294, 296, 301, 306, 315, 317, 319–20, 322, 327, 331, 333, 336–38, 341, 344, 347–48, 350, 358–59, 365, 367, 369, 371–73, 375–79, 381, 383, 388–89, 391–92, 397–98, 408–410, 415–16, 420–22, 426, 433, 435, 442, 446, 452–61, 472, 474, 479–80, 483, 485–87, 493–95, 497–502, 504–507, 510, 515, 518, 526–27, 532, 535–37, 541, 543, 549, 551–53, 555–56, 564–65, 569–70, 574–75, 584, 586, 592, 599–600, 602, 606–607, 612–13, 616–19, 631, 638

famine 285, 384–85, 388

Felix 17, 22, 402, 464–65, 467

Festus, Porcius 22, 465, 467

food 29, 32–34, 61, 67, 78, 80, 82, 84, 88–89, 109, 125, 156, 181, 183, 187, 202, 233, 349–50, 412, 435, 438–41, 457, 472, 482, 511–12, 527, 533, 537, 574

forgiveness 111, 135, 143, 153, 158, 162, 168, 177, 179, 194, 213, 217, 221–22, 445, 452, 579

form criticism see Gospels

G

Galatia, Galatians 23–24, 45, 81, 90, 212, 227, 237, 335, 351, 364, 369–72, 374, 377, 381–88, 391–93, 395, 397–98, 403–408, 410–11, 413–14, 420–21, 428, 431, 434–35, 440, 446, 449–53, 459–60, 472–73, 475, 478, 482, 484–85, 492–93, 495–96, 498–504, 506, 510, 515, 517–18, 520, 532, 535, 551–52, 559, 573, 597, 602

Galilee 13–14, 16, 18, 59–60, 62–63, 66, 88, 107–108, 119, 175, 179, 185–86, 195, 228–30, 232, 250, 258, 280, 282, 294, 298–99, 307, 351–53, 532, 534, 559, 580, 586, 598, 613, 629, 633–34, 638

Gallio 22, 359, 363, 419

Gamaliel 87, 302, 368–69

Genesis 140, 150, 295, 409–10, 418, 505, 539, 550, 555, 615, 623

Gentiles 14, 16, 52, 60, 64, 90, 104, 107, 110–11, 131, 167, 179, 199, 252–53, 285–87, 293–94, 302–303, 315, 327, 336–37, 340–41, 350–53, 357, 364, 369–70, 377, 385–87, 389, 391–95, 397–98, 404, 408, 410, 412, 417, 420–21, 428, 438, 448–52, 454, 459, 461–64, 468, 472, 477, 498, 501–502, 504, 518, 526–27, 529, 533–34, 537–38, 544, 546, 551–53, 559, 574, 594–95, 629, 633

Gerizim 78, 179, 345

Gnosticism, Gnostics 48–51, 54, 145, 300–301, 435, 469, 473–74, 484, 489, 502, 520, 573, 575, 578, 583, 585, 597–98, 600, 628, 632–33, 637

Gnostic gospels 145, 254, 264, 300

gospels 242–77

historicity of 100, 139, 251–55, 260–62, 273–77, 306–307, 315–16

form criticism 245–47, 274–77, 265–68, 270–77, 304–305, 319, 618, 633

nature of 242–51

non-canonical 321

redaction criticism 245, 274, 304–305, 307, 319, 618

source criticism 618, 639

see also Matthew; Mark; Luke; John

Greece, Greek 13, 15, 16, 18, 20–21, 25, 27, 30–31, 33–38, 40–43, 45, 48, 51–54, 56–58, 65, 68, 81, 86, 94, 96, 103–104, 107–108, 110, 120, 122, 125, 132, 134, 142, 147, 150, 162–63, 194, 197, 220–21, 226–27, 244, 246–47, 249, 253, 256–57, 259, 268–69, 271, 280, 282–85, 292–93, 295, 299–300, 302, 307, 312, 317, 333, 341–42, 344, 355, 363, 366–67, 370, 376–77, 394–95, 402, 412, 417–18, 421, 425, 428, 433–36, 439, 441, 446, 454, 457, 464, 467, 473–74, 476, 478, 499, 504, 507, 513, 518, 523, 527, 531–32, 535, 542, 544–45, 558–59, 566, 572, 577, 582, 590, 595, 601–602, 614–15, 620, 624, 627, 631–33, 635–37, 639–40

Greek religion 26

see also Hellenism; mystery religions

H

Hasmonean 59–60, 71, 636

heaven 75, 77, 79, 125, 129, 131, 134–36, 150, 155–56, 182, 192, 208, 226, 238, 325, 346, 370, 381, 447, 449, 477, 484, 503, 540, 545, 563, 567–68, 570, 577, 584, 614, 629–30

Hebrew 16, 53–54, 68–72, 73–76, 81, 84, 90, 94–95, 103–104, 106–108, 110, 114, 120, 132–34, 140–41, 147–48, 168, 173, 177, 182–83, 188, 190, 192–95, 200, 218, 226, 230, 233–34, 247, 252–53, 276, 286, 292–93, 299, 315, 321, 330–33, 337, 342–45, 348, 353, 367, 371, 375, 391–93, 397, 402, 405, 409, 438, 456–57, 472, 480, 496, 501–502, 526–27, 532, 536–49, 551, 553, 577, 594, 596, 598, 605, 616, 623–24, 630–33, 635, 638–40

Hebrews, book of 188, 217, 289, 344, 353, 409, 537, 544–49, 557, 596, 605, 624

Hellenism 20–21, 26, 29, 31, 34–35, 40, 42–43, 45, 48, 51, 55–58, 66, 81, 85–86, 105–107, 125, 140, 174–75, 244, 246–48, 270, 272, 299, 303, 309, 322, 342–43, 347–49, 351–52, 366–67, 369, 382, 394, 397, 405, 417, 434, 438, 457–58, 504, 532, 534, 538, 545, 547, 549, 554, 575, 587, 594, 613–14, 632–34, 636–38

see also Greece, Greek

Hellenists, Hellenist Christians 342–43, 347–48, 594

heresy, heretics 183, 278, 302, 342, 364, 462, 472, 489, 534, 547, 573–75, 578, 580, 583, 597–600, 603, 632

Herod the Great 58–61, 62, 63–67, 88, 97–99, 537, 629, 634

Antipas 62, 64, 198, 229, 629, 634

Agrippa I 66, 350, 385, 388

Agrippa II 66, 370, 380, 465, 629

Archelaus 61–63, 73, 97

historical-critical method 608, 618–20, 634

Holy Spirit 83, 115, 125, 127, 130, 138, 164, 194, 201, 226, 230, 236, 287, 301, 310, 325–27, 339, 365, 389, 404–405, 408, 411, 414, 421, 423, 434, 441, 446, 448–49, 453–55, 458, 477, 479, 486, 489–490, 500, 503–504, 509, 513, 515, 526, 541, 551, 579, 588–89, 591–93, 595–99, 601, 634–35, 637

gifts of 325–27, 340, 441–42, 448, 477, 490, 512, 513–15, 518, 529, 540, 588, 593, 595, 601

houses, homes 13–14, 18, 21, 23–24, 26, 33–35, 37–39, 49, 51–53, 65, 76–77, 81–91, 95–96, 105–106, 108, 112, 136, 140, 148, 151–52, 154, 157–58, 173, 184, 186, 190–91, 201, 208, 228, 248, 279, 291, 314, 330, 333, 341, 343, 348, 350, 352–53, 366, 382–83, 389, 397, 407, 415–17, 419, 431, 441, 447, 450, 468, 470–71, 474, 487, 514, 520, 522–23, 527, 547, 550, 554, 577, 589–90, 596, 599, 614–15, 630–31, 637

I

Idumea 59, 62–63, 66, 634

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch 294, 475, 591, 602

infancy narratives 105, 145

interpretation 84, 87, 101, 149–53, 203, 207, 234, 236, 294, 296–97, 332, 362, 381, 388, 391, 434, 441, 455, 457, 491, 543, 560, 564, 581, 607, 612, 616–17, 619, 622, 632, 634, 637, 639

Irenaeus 48, 278, 280, 284, 302, 557, 571, 577, 603

Iscariot, Judas 74, 200, 227, 352, 355, 594

J

Jacob 59, 531, 543, 635

James, brother of Jesus 108, 227, 347, 350, 353, 355, 390, 387–88, 408, 412, 455, 463, 527–36, 585–87, 596, 603

brother of John, son of Zebedee 124, 233, 355

son of Alphaeus 356

letter of 323, 527–36, 552, 581

Jeremiah 140, 337, 536–37

Jerusalem 13–14, 18, 51, 57, 59, 61–62, 64–65, 67, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80–81, 83, 86–88, 90, 99–100, 108, 113, 121, 126, 139–40, 147, 150, 157, 162, 168, 179–80, 197–202, 205, 209, 211, 229–30, 234, 258, 262, 279, 281–82, 285–86, 288, 293–95, 298–99, 301, 314, 330, 335–38, 340–43, 345–54, 356, 358–60, 362–63, 366, 368–69, 371, 375, 378–80, 382–90, 393–95, 397–99, 405–406, 408, 412–

14, 428–29, 432, 443–44, 446–47, 449, 451, 458, 462–67, 470, 486, 488, 494, 496, 509, 527, 531–34, 536–39, 546–48, 571, 575, 588, 594–96, 613, 629–30, 634, 638

church in 47, 108, 347–48, 350, 352–53, 360, 362, 375, 385–86, 390, 394, 398, 413, 428, 432, 443–44, 447, 463, 531, 536, 546, 575, 588, 595–96

Council of 356, 386, 412–13, 527, 630

fall of 74, 162, 229–30, 281, 285–86, 293, 358–59, 368, 371, 638

Jesus' visits to 139, 157, 198–99, 282, 294, 298, 351–52

Jesus, ascension 229, 238–39, 288, 319, 355, 630

baptism 97, 111, 114–15, 120, 139, 143, 254–55, 282, 298, 577

birth 12–13, 44, 58, 76, 94–106, 256, 261, 368, 563, 616

childhood and family 94, 105–109, 145, 244, 250, 256

miracles 128, 139, 151, 165–76, 188, 195, 197, 215, 272, 282, 441, 561, 611

resurrection 54, 127, 144, 164, 173, 194, 225, 227, 237, 239, 286, 308, 330, 339, 374, 417, 442, 480, 483, 498, 505, 542, 566–67

return (parousia) 287, 422–24, 426, 485–86, 506–508, 580, 600, 637

teaching 11, 13, 47, 54, 77, 111, 121–22, 125, 130, 134, 142, 144, 146, 147–76, 183, 186–91, 193, 195, 198–99, 209, 216, 221, 235, 250–51, 253–55, 262, 272, 275, 290, 296–97, 300, 304, 306–309, 314–16, 321, 323, 326, 330–31, 357, 361, 375, 395–96, 407, 411, 434, 437, 439, 447, 455, 493, 504, 506, 521–22, 529, 535–36, 554, 557–58, 625, 635

temptations 115–18, 120, 139, 143, 170, 175–76, 215, 254–55, 269

trials and death 164, 197–223, 225–26, 229, 232, 236–37, 260, 267, 281, 296, 346–47, 377–78, 378, 460, 502, 533, 538

see also Messiah

Jews, Judaism 56–65, 177–78, 182, 336

and Christianity 178, 286, 302, 456–59, 526–72

Diaspora 631

and Jesus 17, 321

and Paul 366–72, 390–96, 397–98

and Romans 51–53

see also Temple

John, disciple 124, 229, 303

the Baptist 64, 94, 98, 109–15, 112–15, 129, 132, 175–76, 258, 298–99, 341, 346, 348, 350, 356, 362, 355, 387, 531, 571, 577, 580–83, 631, 635

the Elder 580

gospel of 102, 105, 115, 119, 122–24, 128, 135–37, 141, 144, 148, 156, 159, 161, 165–69, 174, 180, 184, 186, 193, 198–206, 208–209, 201–206, 229, 231, 238, 242, 246, 252, 255, 276, 279, 294–95, 297, 299, 301, 572, 575, 580–82, 621, 623, 629, 633, 636–37

letters of 548, 571, 575–83, 596–97, 602, 622, 625

1 John 216, 548, 572, 575–83, 596, 603, 625

author of Revelation 325, 565–69, 571, 603

Joppa 349, 354

Jordan river 62, 110, 112, 185, 299, 635

Josephus 51, 61, 64–69, 71–73, 80, 87, 97–98, 110, 112–13, 145, 172–73, 197–98, 211, 343–44, 346, 357, 635

Joshua 539, 542

Judaizers 398, 405, 408–411, 414, 421, 433–34, 443, 451, 453, 459, 472, 482, 492, 635

see also circumcise, circumcision

Jude, letter of 575, 583–87, 596, 603

Judea 14, 22, 58–60, 62, 63, 65–67, 97, 99, 106–107, 185, 197, 199, 208, 211, 298–99, 330, 336, 341, 346, 348–49, 351, 356, 358, 379, 384, 389, 394, 462–63, 613, 629, 635, 637–38

see also Jerusalem

Judges 95, 141, 311

Justice 120–22, 130, 135, 140, 156, 160, 176, 182–83, 188, 190–92, 199, 216, 220–21, 331, 377–78, 391, 411–12, 415, 452–53, 455, 460, 478, 480, 495–96, 503–504, 517–22, 535, 550, 554, 567–70, 636

K

Kerygma 194, 226, 245, 249, 253

Kingdom of God 79, 111, 118–31, 138, 151, 154–55, 158, 160–61, 165, 169, 171, 182, 184, 189–90, 193, 207, 236, 294, 316, 373, 468, 503, 506, 509, 591, 635

L

Laodicea 428, 475–76, 562, 565, 569

Last Supper 96, 124, 200–207, 217, 295, 299, 626, 633, 635

see also Eucharist

Latin 12, 16, 35, 37, 51, 71, 81, 145, 246–47, 271, 280, 312, 363, 367, 469, 476,

569, 620, 624–28, 633

law, Jewish 51–53, 89, 103, 124, 177–79, 182, 210, 266, 331, 336–37, 367, 392, 388–89, 386, 397–98, 408, 410, 414, 419, 438, 450, 456, 458, 464, 472, 481, 499, 501–502, 533–34, 536, 538–39, 551, 636–37, 639–40

see also Old Testament

Lazarus 91, 169, 299, 302, 356

logos 125, 142, 295, 299, 572, 581, 635–36

Lord’s supper see Eucharist

Lucian 244

Luke 284–88, 363–65

gospel of 13, 64, 74, 77, 79–80, 83, 87–90, 94–98, 100, 102–108, 111–12, 115–17, 119, 123–24, 131, 133, 135, 137, 139–41, 144, 147–49, 151–61, 164–65, 167–71, 173, 175–76, 180, 186, 198, 200–201, 203, 209, 211, 228–29, 231, 238, 242, 246–49, 251, 254–66, 269, 276–79, 284–88, 292–93, 298, 303–304, 308, 310, 312, 314, 325, 330, 332–33, 336, 338–39, 341, 346, 348–49, 351, 356–65, 367, 373, 378, 380–83, 385–87, 390, 397, 413–14, 416, 418, 428, 437, 503, 507, 509, 531, 535, 558, 589, 594, 610, 626–27, 631

see also Acts of the Apostles

Luther, Martin 371, 454–55, 457, 459, 528, 535–36, 563, 610–11

M

Maccabean 60, 67, 70–71, 78, 636

Macedonia 20, 335, 394, 400, 414, 420–21, 428, 432

magic 44, 397, 430, 435, 439, 561, 614

Magnificat 94, 105

manuscripts, ancient see Text

Marcion 284, 357, 469, 476, 491, 603

Mark 162, 278–84

gospel of 13–15, 37, 44, 64, 70, 74, 77, 82–83, 89, 91, 102, 106, 108–109, 111, 114, 116, 119–20, 123–24, 126–27, 129–33, 135–36, 139–40, 143, 147–49, 152, 158–62, 165–71, 173, 175–76, 180–81, 183, 186, 192–93, 199–203, 205, 208, 215, 217, 219, 228, 234, 248, 254, 256, 258–59, 261, 267–69, 281, 283, 285, 292, 297–99, 304, 309, 314, 331–33, 336, 341–42, 349, 369, 378, 395, 503, 509, 586, 590, 594, 600

martyrdom 246, 347, 355, 358, 413, 467, 480, 531, 561–62, 572

Mary Magdalene 229, 231

Mary, mother of Jesus 94, 106, 108–109, 629

Matthew 288–94

gospel of 11, 13–15, 44, 53, 60, 70, 77, 79, 85, 89, 91, 97–98, 100, 103, 106, 111, 116–17, 119, 123–24, 126, 129–31, 135–36, 140–41, 144, 149, 151–53, 155–57, 159–63, 165, 168–71, 173, 175–76, 180, 182, 187–89, 192, 194–95, 198, 200–201, 203, 229, 234, 254, 256, 258–59, 267, 269, 289, 298, 314, 330–33, 336, 378, 395, 411, 423, 507, 527–30, 536, 558, 561, 570, 594, 616, 631, 639

Melchizedek 73, 539–42, 546

Mesopotamia 14, 45, 65, 190, 550, 630

Messiah 16, 58, 68, 70, 73, 94, 104, 109–11, 114–17, 120–21, 126, 132, 134, 136–40, 143, 164, 169, 171–72, 188, 199, 212, 226, 233, 236, 252–53, 281–82, 287, 290, 294, 299–300, 315, 319, 337, 342, 348, 352, 363, 370, 372, 378–79, 381, 383, 389, 391, 393, 415, 417, 434, 451, 453, 458, 461, 463, 479, 495–96, 499, 501, 503, 508, 535, 538, 546, 575–77, 598, 631, 636

Jesus as 236, 281–82, 290, 319, 370, 391, 451, 458, 461, 479, 501, 535, 538

Messianic secret 137–38, 318, 636

Miracles see Jesus

Mishnah 69, 202, 210–11, 349, 371, 636, 639

mission 137–38, 143, 167, 182, 247, 252, 301, 306, 336, 348–49, 356, 359, 385, 389, 404, 417–20, 538, 561, 588, 594, 616, 630

Mithraism 46

monastery, monasticism 110, 112, 623

money 15, 23, 25, 115–16, 178–80, 200, 285, 295, 338, 483

Moses 68–70, 73, 75, 105, 130, 168, 179, 186, 195, 289, 332, 343, 434, 463, 493, 539, 542–43, 546, 550, 586, 632, 639

Mystery religions 43–48, 54, 375–76, 416, 434, 636

N

Nag Hammadi 300, 636

see also Gnosticism

Nazareth 11–14, 54, 62, 63, 80, 95, 100, 106–108, 167, 169, 191, 212, 259, 261, 287, 319, 381, 577, 633

Nebuchadnezzar 58, 76, 80, 536–37

Nero 36–37, 67, 106, 280, 351, 358–59, 365, 467, 487, 549, 560–62, 571

Newton, Sir Isaac 313

Nicolaitans 574–75

O

Octavian see Augustus

Old Testament 49, 103, 105–106, 124, 135, 141, 150, 164, 178, 182, 189–90, 217, 234, 247, 252, 255, 265, 276, 287, 290–91, 294–95, 327, 337, 339, 343, 345, 370, 391–92, 404–405, 408–10, 418, 434, 456, 459, 482, 493–94, 496, 501, 505, 526, 528–29, 537, 539, 541–43, 549–51, 557, 560, 564, 566–67, 583, 591, 623, 633, 637

in Greek (Septuagint) 52, 103–104, 367, 602, 630, 636, 639–40

see also Law, Jewish

Onesimus 470, 474–75, 521–22

Origen 17, 145, 284, 544–45, 569, 586, 625, 627

Oxyrhynchus 145, 254

P

Palestine 15, 17, 45, 51, 54, 56–60, 63, 67, 71–72, 79–81, 83–84, 91, 94, 103, 106, 108, 122, 198–99, 206, 212, 253, 280–81, 293–94, 299–300, 303, 314, 330, 337, 345, 347–52, 356, 366, 382, 396, 428, 433, 448, 457–58, 464–65, 532, 534, 537, 545, 582, 594, 630, 633, 636–38

see also Jerusalem; Judea; Galilee

Pamphylia 14, 335, 466

Papias 148, 250, 278, 356, 581, 599

parables 129, 148–65, 167, 169, 171–72, 179, 183, 186, 188–89, 195, 256, 270–71, 288, 291, 294, 333, 336, 605, 612, 616, 629, 637

parousia see Jesus, return of

Passover 63, 82–83, 87, 200–207, 214, 217–18, 299, 339, 523, 556, 635, 637

Pastoral Epistles 358, 467–68, 482, 489–90, 523

see also Timothy, letters to; Titus

Paul, early years 366–69

and Judaism 369–73, 398, 498–99

conversion 106, 227, 368, 378–80, 386–88, 398, 460–61, 496, 498, 500–501, 510–11, 532

and Jesus 395–96, 495–96

contacts with Jerusalem church 383–85, 462–64

mission strategy 336, 367, 397, 413–14, 420, 440, 472

imprisonments 416, 465, 469–91

death 368, 467–68

theology 457, 492–94

letters 397–427, 431–33, 469–91, 492–94

Pentateuch 68, 289, 547

Pentecost, Day of 83, 87, 164, 173, 197, 236, 337–42, 345, 350, 368, 509, 526, 537, 589–90, 592, 594

Pergamum 354, 562, 565, 574

persecution 11, 17, 36, 41, 66, 76, 106, 135, 209, 216, 276, 280–81, 294, 301, 347, 350–51, 353, 358–59, 378–81, 385, 388, 423, 426, 445, 448, 459, 467, 479, 487, 495, 511, 538–39, 547, 549, 554–55, 558, 560–62, 565, 567, 571, 615

Peter (Cephas) 300, 387, 408, 433–35

1 Peter 212, 216–17, 219–20, 279, 523, 533, 552–63, 567, 569, 587, 596, 603,

615;

2 Peter 359, 575, 583–87, 596, 601–603

Pharisees 67–71, 74–75, 78–79, 87, 89, 108, 123, 153, 158, 167, 170, 175, 177, 179, 183, 195, 198, 204–205, 291, 331, 333, 336, 352, 366, 369–71, 381, 388, 416, 462, 464, 481, 494–95, 506, 637–39

Philemon 279, 285, 368, 403, 469–70, 474–75, 478, 482, 521

Philip, disciple 561

evangelist 327, 348, 355, 581

gospel of see Gnostic gospels

Philippi, Philippians 15, 24, 33, 35, 62, 65, 191, 237, 282, 354, 363, 400, 414–16, 428–29, 470–71, 478–79, 481, 514, 523–24, 613

Philippians, letter of 24, 33, 191, 237, 372, 377, 383, 407, 460, 478–79, 490, 495, 500, 503, 506, 508, 514, 524, 556, 596

Philo 51–52, 71, 211, 244, 434, 542–43, 545

philosophy 21, 38–43, 51–52, 86, 142, 150, 220, 282, 295–96, 299, 319, 373–74, 416–17, 434, 490, 507, 542, 609

Pilate 106, 197, 202, 207–209, 211, 301, 346, 637–38

pilgrimage 43–44, 80, 83, 87, 108, 149, 202, 234, 288, 337, 341, 430, 537, 543, 561

Plato 147, 317, 545, 577

poetry, poet 94, 100, 143, 145–46, 188, 293, 300, 314, 367, 373, 417, 419, 480

Polycarp 557, 603

Pompey 59, 106

poverty 15, 26, 94, 133, 167, 169, 192, 195, 202, 216, 243, 259, 394, 388, 441,

503, 511, 533, 546, 610

prayer 80, 108, 156–57, 189, 291, 302, 304, 312, 338, 402, 407, 415, 423, 445, 530, 555, 565

Priest, priesthood 26, 31–33, 45, 57, 68, 72–73, 78, 89, 94, 106, 112–13, 136–37, 150, 180–81, 200, 208, 218, 345, 380, 456, 537–38, 539–42, 545–46, 553, 558, 564, 591, 597, 610, 629, 638, 640

prison, imprisonment 17, 43, 49, 260, 312, 350, 360, 362, 368, 416, 430, 463, 465, 469–70, 472, 479, 487–88, 577, 626, 628

prophets, prophecy 28, 68, 73, 75–77, 103, 109–10, 116, 120–21, 132–33, 148, 153, 168–69, 172–73, 179, 182, 186, 199, 252, 255, 293, 317–18, 325–28, 331, 337, 339, 378, 384–85, 388, 392, 394, 397, 441, 449, 452, 456, 485, 490, 516, 527, 536, 539, 542, 565–66, 574, 576, 578–79, 634–35

Proselytes 53, 389, 398, 417, 527

Protestant 25, 391, 454–57, 536, 563, 630

Proverbs 85, 148, 188, 529–30

Psalms 114, 116, 121, 133, 135, 140, 188, 202, 266, 539, 557, 623–24

Q

Q 175, 255, 257, 260, 262, 264–65, 277, 293, 298, 304, 318, 321–22, 324, 638, 640

see also Gospels

Quirinius 97–99, 138

Qumrân 71–73, 78, 109–10, 112–14, 140, 204–205, 252, 300, 303, 345, 546, 631–32, 638

R

rabbis 53, 68, 79, 84–86, 124, 145, 147–48, 179, 270, 272, 308, 323, 330, 332, 339, 368–73, 379, 437, 456, 458, 502, 504, 638, 642

readers, and text 11, 37, 75–76, 100, 104, 115, 119, 123, 125, 131, 138, 154, 165, 177, 188, 191, 193, 195, 217, 219, 227, 231, 245, 249, 251–52, 259, 274, 276, 280, 283, 287, 291, 296–98, 300, 302, 305, 307, 309–10, 312, 316, 326, 336, 346, 358, 361–62, 365, 391, 396, 402, 407, 411, 418, 420, 424–25, 445, 447, 453, 456, 459, 462, 473, 475–78, 480–81, 484–86, 492, 494, 504, 510, 517, 520–21, 528–31, 538, 540–41, 543, 546–49, 552–57, 559–60, 563, 565, 568–70, 580, 582–83, 585–88, 592, 596, 602, 608, 612, 616–17, 641

redaction criticism 245, 272, 274, 304, 307, 309, 319, 618

Resurrection 35, 54, 68, 85, 101, 106, 127, 130, 138, 144, 148, 164, 173, 194, 201, 207, 215, 223, 224–39, 253, 256, 258, 260, 265, 283, 286, 289, 290, 296, 303, 308, 314, 319, 321, 330, 336–39, 355, 368, 370, 374, 417, 426, 435, 442–43, 446–47, 451, 460, 464, 480–81, 483, 498, 500, 502–503, 505–506, 518, 529, 542–43, 553, 566–67, 576, 579–80, 583–84, 588, 600, 630, 637–39

of Jesus see Jesus

Revelation, book of 37, 50, 75–76, 114, 125, 139, 142, 172, 182, 216, 289, 325, 327, 372, 374, 376, 381, 385, 387–88, 404, 409, 415, 449, 495, 508, 543, 563–72, 574–76, 583–84, 597, 603, 615–16, 618, 624, 629

revolt, revolution 17, 67, 70–71, 73, 78, 123, 130, 172, 198, 207, 212, 234, 426, 432, 479, 521, 537, 564, 636, 640

rhetoric 39, 86, 274, 366, 373, 545, 632, 638

ritual 31, 34, 46, 70–71, 73, 89, 91, 111, 113, 202, 207–208, 218, 331–32, 382, 388, 434, 455, 463, 472–73, 523, 527, 533, 536–43, 545, 547, 550

Rome, Romans 14–16, 22–25, 30, 34–37, 51, 58–60, 62–64, 66–67, 81, 87, 99, 106, 113, 117–18, 120, 130, 147, 178, 180, 209, 211, 213, 236, 260, 262, 280, 285, 317, 334, 351, 354, 358, 362, 368, 375, 384, 390, 395, 403, 414–15, 433, 450, 453–54, 462, 465–70, 478, 486, 487–88, 518, 547–49, 561–62, 569, 589–91, 596, 602–603, 615, 623–24, 629, 631, 635, 640

church in 395, 450, 454, 547, 561–62, 590

Roman religion 25–38

Roman empire 11, 13, 16–17, 20, 33, 42–43, 51, 53, 55, 63, 83, 97, 99, 122, 132, 140, 147, 150, 177, 193, 223, 253, 277, 280, 283, 296, 299, 307, 333, 335, 341–42, 347, 351, 353, 359, 365, 369, 377, 379, 397–98, 403, 457, 462, 465, 471, 475, 509, 515, 523, 532, 534, 537, 539, 595, 608, 627

letter to 16, 24, 35, 37, 125, 133, 216, 219, 222, 236–37, 327, 337, 364, 372, 377, 390, 392–95, 408–409, 412, 417, 428, 430, 457, 460, 462, 467, 469, 470, 496–97, 500, 504–505, 508, 510, 513, 515, 517–18, 526, 535, 547, 553, 589–90, 595, 597, 610, 616

Rylands papyrus 621–22

S

sacrifice, in Judaism 157, 180, 191, 206, 211, 214, 217–19, 237, 537, 548

in Greek and Roman religion 25, 412, 435, 439, 535

and death of Jesus 106, 191, 217–19, 368, 421, 538, 540, 552, 591

Sadducees 67–71, 74–75, 78–79, 198, 208, 369, 464, 506, 637–38

salvation 47, 140, 239, 286–87, 336, 370, 374–75, 393, 405, 409, 418, 432, 453–55, 458–59, 472–73, 483, 497, 501–502, 505–506, 517, 541, 545, 548, 568, 577

Samaria, Samaritans 44, 62–63, 78, 149–50, 153, 160, 178–79, 184–86, 287, 325, 330, 336, 345, 348–49, 358, 363, 531, 610, 638

Samuel 68, 105, 121, 140–41, 317

Sanhedrin 68, 87, 173, 202, 208, 210–11, 342–43, 346, 369–70, 464, 638

Sardis 562, 565

Satan 117, 170–71, 215, 436, 574–75

Scribe 147, 173, 330, 625, 628, 638

Seneca 39, 374, 419

Septuagint see Old Testament

Sermon on the Mount 11, 126, 149, 156, 182, 187–88, 190, 193–95, 253–54, 257, 267, 289, 314, 323, 528, 631, 639

Shepherd of Hermas 603, 623

Silas 35, 43, 390, 413–16, 419–21

Simon, the Zealot 29, 44, 49, 74, 108, 203, 349, 356, 561, 586

sin 150, 170, 180, 191–92, 206, 215, 217–18, 409, 453, 548

Slaves, slavery 22–23, 25, 32, 39, 83, 121, 189, 191, 200, 214, 217, 219, 308, 342, 409–10, 415, 419, 453, 470, 474–75, 498–99, 517–18, 520–22, 550, 554, 632

Solomon, King 58, 343, 536–37, 549, 623, 635

Son of God 36, 100, 139–42, 169, 236, 251, 282, 290, 295, 299, 301, 317, 453, 496, 503, 539–41, 575–77, 584, 629

Son of Man 126, 128, 132–37, 139, 143, 160, 164, 199, 208, 238, 282, 315, 346, 363, 598

Stephen 73, 81, 342–49, 356, 379, 382, 392, 494, 526, 533, 538, 545, 575

Stoics, Stoicism 38–40, 48, 52, 373–74, 376, 510, 636

Suetonius 16, 145

suffering servant 114, 143

synagogue 23, 51–52, 80–81, 86–87, 106–107, 119, 147, 167, 169, 178, 205, 287, 294, 302–303, 330, 341–42, 344, 367, 369, 383, 393, 397, 415–16, 419–20,

434, 450, 524, 526, 534, 537, 549, 594

synoptic problem 255–56, 260, 307, 639, 640

see also Gospels

T

Tacitus 22, 145, 211, 244, 317, 560, 620

Talmud 90, 173, 621, 639

Tarsus 24, 39, 87, 354, 366–68, 373–74, 383–85, 398

taxation 117, 147–48, 158, 179, 208, 292, 333, 394

temple, at Jerusalem 21, 23, 26, 31, 33, 37–38, 51, 56–57, 61, 63, 65, 67–69, 72–73, 78, 80–81, 83, 88, 90, 95, 99, 108, 116, 140, 147, 158–59, 175, 179–80, 199, 205–206, 211, 218, 293–95, 332–33, 341–48, 353, 371, 378–79, 382, 394–95, 430, 438–39, 443, 454, 464, 527, 536–38, 540, 546–49, 553, 571, 594, 638, 640

temptations, of Jesus see Jesus

Tertullian 48, 284, 556

testimonia 104, 252, 255

see also Gospels

text, textual criticism 607–608, 627–28, 639

Thaddaeus 355

Thessalonians, Thessalonica 41, 335, 354, 363–64, 400, 416, 419–23, 426–29, 463, 507, 515, 601

1 Thessalonians 41, 129, 368, 377, 395, 403, 420–21, 423–25, 431, 490, 507, 515, 596, 601

2 Thessalonians 129, 368, 394, 403, 423–26, 431, 624

Thomas 145, 355, 581

Gospel of 109, 145, 175, 321, 598

see also Gnosticism

Thucydides 312, 344, 620

Thyatira 354, 415, 562, 565, 574–75

Tiberius 65, 66, 97

Timothy 390, 413–14, 416, 419–21, 432, 463, 470, 481–83, 487, 489, 544–45

letters to 33, 214, 285, 327, 377, 423, 482–84, 487–88, 490, 520, 523, 576, 593

see also Pastoral Epistles

Titus 106, 358, 367–68, 432, 444, 447, 467, 482–83, 487–89, 523, 537, 624

see also Pastoral Epistles

Tongues, speaking in 339–40, 350, 441–42, 512–13

Transfiguration 127, 269, 587

V

Vespasian 67

visions 44, 75, 77, 181, 230, 232, 339, 449, 563, 565, 567–68, 574

W

wealth 88, 158, 331, 343, 394, 631

wisdom 28, 50, 68, 147–48, 162, 187–90, 295, 309, 321, 415, 420, 435, 473–74, 529–30, 635, 640

women 28, 46, 84–86, 103, 184, 228–29, 328, 337, 415, 433, 440–41, 449, 479, 492, 498, 510, 517–20, 523–24, 554, 556, 567, 575, 592, 610

worship, in Greek and Roman religion 219, 412, 571

in the church 234, 244, 247, 252, 266, 312, 440–42, 508, 519–20, 555, 565, 599–600

Z

Zealots 67, 73–74, 79, 113, 121, 127, 208, 212, 356, 640

Zechariah 94, 112, 121, 199, 378, 635

Zeno 38

Zeus 27, 28, 29, 31–32, 56